

# **Dramatic Analysis**



Dramatic Analysis:

# A Reader on Western Drama

By R. J. Cardullo



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*Dramatic Analysis: A Reader on Western Drama*

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## INTRODUCTION

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From the essays included in this book, one will quickly discover that my preoccupations as a critic are not theoretical. I am, rather, a “close reader” committed to a detailed yet objective examination of the structure, style, imagery, characterization, and language of a play. As someone who once regularly worked in the theater as a dramaturg, moreover, I am concerned chiefly with dramatic analysis that can be of benefit not only to playreaders and theatergoers, but also to directors, designers, and even actors—that is, with analysis of character, action, dialogue, and setting that can be translated into concepts for theatrical production, or that can at least provide the kind of understanding of a play with which a theater practitioner could fruitfully quarrel. Many of the plays considered in this volume are regularly produced, especially by university theaters, and it my hope that these explicatory essays and notes will in some small way make a contribution to future stagings. A number of these dramas—such as those by Shakespeare, Shaw, Molière, Eugene O’Neill, and Tennessee Williams—are also routinely treated in high school and college courses on dramatic literature, so it is also my hope that the relatively short (and therefore less intimidating, more accessible) pieces contained in *Dramatic Analysis: A Reader on Western Drama* will serve students as models for the writing of play analyses.

What follows is the explication of a method for playreading and analysis, not in the conviction that such a method will exhaust every value in a play, but in the hope that it will uncover the major areas the reader of plays should consider. Let no one assume that fruitful analysis of plays is a matter of simple enumeration or of filling in blanks on a comprehensive questionnaire. Analysis also involves judgment. There is no shortcut to cultivating an ear for good dialogue, an eye for effective staging, or a feeling for proper balance and structure in the work as a whole. Just as the reader will better understand

what a play is by reading and seeing as many plays as possible, so will he or she better analyze and interpret plays by having read, seen, *and* extensively thought about them. All I can do here is to cite some of the approaches that have proved useful to readers in the past.

Although some beginning readers assume a hostility between reading and analysis, I must stress that the two activities are thoroughly compatible. Indeed, beginning students sometimes evidence a mistrust of any kind of literary analysis. It gains expression in the form of such statements as “I enjoyed the work for itself. Why spoil it by taking it apart?” Analysis, literary criticism, and the consideration and discussion of ideas are not designed, however, to spoil literary works; they are intended to widen and deepen our appreciation of those works. We may even say that consideration and discussion are different stages in the same process: that of enjoying and understanding a play. Good analysis grows out of a thorough and informed reading and only out of such a reading.

## Reading the Play

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As one sits down to read a play, one ponders the question, “What is it about?” Before one can answer this or any other query, one needs some general conception of what a play, any play, is supposed to be. To emphasize only the central idea of drama, I can remind the student of the Aristotelian dictum that a play is an “imitation of an action” in the form of an action. The reader should therefore seek to experience in reading, even as one experiences in the theater itself, the depiction of a total coherent action in terms of a number of subordinate actions. Moreover, the reader ought to be disposed toward a high degree of imaginative participation in a play. Since the playwright himself always has an eye on some ideal performance in a theater, the reader should allow his or her imagination to supply some of the details of that performance just as the dramatist has done. The willing suspension of disbelief that Coleridge asked from readers of poetry must be paralleled, or exceeded, by a willing entry into the world of the play’s action on the part of the playreader.

All of the above is general. What, specifically, does a reader do? The following observations are meant to make clear what a reader may do. First, read the play through for story and plot. Your first reading should concentrate on continuity, mood, and impact. After reading the play, review the plot and story in your mind. Seek to apprehend what the total action of the play is. Here, aids such as plot summaries are not bad or wrong, provided they are used as aids and not substitutes. No reliance should be placed on plot summaries by themselves; however, as a means of clarifying the play and

reminding the reader of the major events and their sequence, plot summaries can serve a useful purpose.

It is always advisable, in reading a play for the first or second time, to make brief notes about problem passages by any method the reader find convenient. These notes may refer to matters other than the meanings of archaic or difficult words and expressions. For example, one may want to ask oneself about certain characters or events. Questions like these could form the basis for subsequent reading in detail, which should take place when one is satisfied that one knows the action of the play well and has a good idea of its overall import and pattern. At this point, however, one can go back and either read the whole at a slower and more reflective pace or concentrate on particular passages that initially presented problems or seemed to carry special weight.

During a reading of this kind, some of the issues that will later figure in analysis will occupy an important place in one's considerations. Ask oneself whether one can see the necessity for all the characters in the play. Why is a certain character there? What does his or her presence contribute? Examine language and tone. Try to imagine how a key scene would be staged. These matters, and many more, can be examined at length and in depth as one rereads with a solid knowledge of the whole's play's action; but in one's initial readings, one is still primarily concerned with getting to know the play as thoroughly as possible. When one has the play and its events clearly in mind, one can begin to analyze in a more abstract sense, although analysis has in fact been taking place in one's mind all along.

## Analysis

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Critical analysis, I have already said, must grow out of a thorough reading. So necessary is this that, as a general rule of procedure in analysis, we can say: When in doubt reread the work, whether this means a scene, an act, or even the whole play. Careful reading and verification through reference to the play are the only ways to guard against an analysis that is spun out on a slender thread and has become irrelevant to the work in question. A good analysis will touch on the literary text point after point.

The best way to proceed in analysis is to begin with questions of technique and then move to matters of interpretation. In this way, one can again begin with the work itself and base one's evaluation on a careful study of the work. Analysis of technique can be thought of as a more penetrating kind of reading. It must rest on an understanding of the entire play because, in general, it seeks to answer the question, "How is this or that done?" Let us assume that one has a good overall picture of the play; one has a view

of its total meaning as well as solid conceptions of character and situation. One should then ask oneself *how* the dramatist conveyed the view one has, always leaving open the possibility that one's reading has been incomplete or improperly weighted. What one will be doing, in effect, is applying what one knows about the drama to a particular play.

Reading and the detailed analysis of technique should lead to something more, something we may call understanding or interpreting the meaning of the play. The question of a play's meaning is sometimes expressed in terms of theme; sometimes in terms of the dramatist's attitude toward his or her subject; and, sometimes, in terms of Aristotle's identification of thought (*dianoia*) as one of the ingredients of drama. Theme in literary works is taken to denote an abstract idea that a work embodies and somehow, in its totality, expresses. In the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton states his theme early: to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to man." Plays rarely contain such explicit declarations of theme. Moreover, the statement of a single theme may not necessarily capture all of work; there may be several themes or several ways of expressing a general theme. Thus, some speak in terms of understanding the dramatist's attitude toward his or her subject. How does the play present events? What does the playwright intend us to comprehend through the action he or she has captured? In Aristotle's terminology, what is the "thought" of the play as a whole? Since plays use words and actions based on, or related in a meaningful way to, human life, they must inevitably convey some thought about life. In discussing the meaning of a play, one endeavors to make clear what that thought is.

However we term our pursuit—theme, attitude, thought—we must not forget that it lies embedded in the work as a whole and that we perceive it from the experience of reading or seeing the play and analyzing that play as thoroughly as possible. But we must guard against making a drama a tract and against overemphasizing the specific verbal expressions of characters in the drama. Instead, we must attempt to make our apprehension of meaning consistent with the total action the play depicts. Therefore, if a statement by a character in the play is taken as the theme, it should be because that statement is a fair assessment of the entire direction of the drama.

The problem of determining theme may be illustrated by referring to plays in which there are clear spokespersons for the author's ideas. In the nineteenth-century well-made play (*pièce bien-faite*), there was usually a character who spoke for the dramatist. This character is called the *raisonneur* (literally, the reasoner) of the play because he or she advances the author's ideas on a subject of interest that is also the issue of the drama. The device did not die with the well-made play, and *raisonneurs* in various guises are

still encountered in plays and films. Often they are “second characters” rather than protagonists, and, not infrequently, the action stops while the reasoner presents the “message” of the play. This device is considered too artificial to make truly excellent drama, since it relieves the author of the task of making his point or idea a part of the texture of the play itself; such “messaging” can even backfire if the author’s head is at war with his or her heart. For example, Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings’ *What Price Glory?* (1924) is supposed to be an anti-war play, according to the authors’ stated intentions; but the total impact of the play seems to argue more that war is fun than that war is hell. Determining the meaning of a play, then, is not a question of finding an official spokesperson for the dramatist, but of finding the center of gravity of the work itself.

It is in determining the meaning of a play that we should call upon our thorough knowledge of the work obtained through our analysis. One could well say that the final purpose of analysis is synthesis. We examine the parts of a play in detail in order to attain a better understanding of the whole; we analyze in order to know, in the deepest sense, what the play is about. Analysis assumes that there has been a pattern of action presented through plot, structure, character, language, music or rhythm, and (imagined) spectacle, a pattern that has a meaning of its own which emerges only through the congruent interaction of the parts of a play. Therefore, characters as we know them through their words and actions; the language of the drama as it both explicitly defines what is going on and projects an atmosphere that suggests it; the symbolism as it brings together a group of associations within the play as well as over and above it—all of these together constitute the meaning of the play. It seems necessary that they be experienced before such meaning can be fruitfully discussed. For this reason, we want to guard against the facile summation offered by a *raisonneur*.

Although the device of the *raisonneur* may be contrived, one must still formulate one’s experience of the play in words, and there may well be characters in plays who utter remarks that seem, to the reader or spectator, to sum up the essential meaning of the work. Some would find in Gloucester’s comment in *King Lear* (1606), “As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. / They kill us for their sport,” an instance of Shakespeare’s expressing his own convictions. This may be the case. However, the test lies not so much in determining which (if any) character is the spokesperson, as in determining whether the action of the play bears out the alleged summation. In *King Lear*, it is not Gloucester’s saying it that constitutes the most important argument for the truth of his comparison (indeed, his saying it might argue against its truth), but the belief that this sentiment adequately conveys the central idea of the drama as the action reveals it. Were we to seek a spokesperson as

such, Gloucester's son Edgar would serve much better. He is a sympathetic character who, among other things, remains loyal while others are shedding old loyalties, and who leads his father to self-understanding despite his father's rejection of him. Because of Edgar's character and conduct, what he says is likely to be of consequence in the play. Nevertheless, the true test is still whether his words are borne out by the total action of the play.

The question that arises in the case of any statement by a character in a play must always be the same: Does this statement fairly represent the thought of the play as a whole? Is it wrongheaded or, perhaps, only a partial view? Here is where careful reading and the careful analysis of technique—in this case, verbal technique—will make the difference. If in *King Lear*, Gloucester's statement is true, how do we account for the sensation of triumph in defeat that great tragedies, including this one by Shakespeare, so often project? Gloucester's remark may be paralleled, it is true, by Lear's own haunting, "I am bound upon a wheel of fire." And there is no question that the two observations epitomize the intense suffering endured by both men in the play. However, do these two observations account for the action in its entirety? If so, why does Shakespeare arrange for order to reassert itself at the end of the play in the form of Albany? Why does Shakespeare not feel impelled to show the world in total chaos at the drama's conclusion, so as to drive home the idea that men are meaningless insects to wanton gods?

Is it not more likely, then, that Gloucester's comment, like Lear's in his agony, must be balanced by the other side shown in the play—the one represented by Cordelia, by the loyal and perceptive Edgar, by Lear's own understanding of himself? What of the serenity of Lear as he rises above the petty intrigues and selfish squabbles of his world when he declares, "We two will sing like birds i' the cage"? Or Edgar's comment to Gloucester himself: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all." Even more significant, what about Edgar's forgiveness of his brother, Edmund, when he urges, "Let's exchange charity" and says, of the same gods his father earlier had likened to wanton boys, "The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us"? This certainly suggests a more purposeful procedure in the universe than Gloucester's assertion. Finally, what of Albany's statement close to the end of the play: "All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their desertings"?

In a play as rich as *King Lear*, we perhaps cannot expect to find a spokesman to sum up all that Shakespeare wanted the play to contain. Nor need we feel that single line or two from any one character must be found. Certainly, though, some of the major issues of the drama are powerfully evoked by the lines cited above, and they can at least form the basis for an intelligent

and thoughtful examination of the play's meaning. If the one's analysis leads to such an examination, one will be justified in believing that analysis has been worthwhile. In the end, the statement of a play's meaning, the result of thorough analysis and careful interpretation, comes very close to answering the deceptively simple question with which one begins the reading of any drama: "What is it all about?"

## Aids in Interpretation

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Plays, like every other work of art, occur in definite times and places and bear upon them the marks of a specific culture and set of circumstances. Great interest attaches to such matters of context because they often contribute to our understanding of works from the past. But beginning students are sometimes distrustful of this interest. As they distrust analysis and abstraction for their presumed deadening effect on the work of art, so too do they distrust "external" considerations for their presumed irrelevance. Both suspicions are misplaced, at least as far as the sincere and measured lover of literature is concerned. We do not want "the tail to wag the dog" in this instance, but neither do we want to chop the tail off. We must keep in mind that the reason we do not always have to read social history or literary biography or comparative religion to understand the latest novel is simply that it is of our own time. However, once the concerns of a period transform themselves into other concerns—that is, once current events become history—the same problems that beset us in reading older literary works will present themselves to our descendants when they read the works of our day. These supposedly external matters, then, are actually part of the culture that any writer assumes as he or she writes.

The problem for students of literature is in knowing what else to study and how to evaluate it. Each work of art will present different problems because some works will be more complex than others. Countless periods and times come under our scrutiny, and each play will make different demands on our knowledge and offer different rewards. This is precisely why the study of literature, dramatic or otherwise, is so fundamentally humanizing: it constantly directs the student to wider fields of investigation and thus to a wider understanding of life. I shall now briefly review the areas that frequently impinge on literature in order to suggest the scope of possible auxiliary study.

**Literary history and biography.** Literary history, broadly construed, is the study of literature as an extended body of material with innumerable interconnections among its constituent parts (individual works) and innumerable influences and parallels that exhibit a continuity and pattern



over time. Besides being an individual literary work, every play occupies a place in literary (not to speak of theatrical) history. Literary history is that discipline concerned with establishing the context in which a work appears, that is, the shifts in taste and practice that have exerted influence on writers at different times. Plays can frequently be better understood when we know something about their literary context. Biographies of authors, in turn, arise from our interest in literary works and the men and women who produced them. Occasionally, biographical information will illuminate a literary work, although extreme caution must be urged on the beginner not to treat an individual play as a biographical document. For the most part, the non-specialist will derive the greatest assistance from what we may call literary biography, or an understanding of the author's literary development, his or her interest in certain themes, styles, and the like at various points in his or her career. The application of personal biography to literature is perhaps nowhere so delicate as in the drama, where an autobiographical spokesperson for the author is even rarer than an ideological spokesperson. Still, a knowledge of literary history and literary biography will contribute considerably to our understanding of the development of drama in general and of the place a particular play occupies in that development, as well as in the culture at large.

**Political and social history.** Since the drama inevitably reflects life, it does so in terms of a particular time, a particular place, and particular issues. Indeed, a knowledge of the political and social conditions of the time of the play can be so important as to be indispensable to an understanding of an individual work. (Non-literary historical elements are similarly important in considering the various playhouses that have been used throughout the evolution of the drama, for the design of a theater can become a matter of literary consequence as well.) Generally, the more one knows about life and society during the period in which a play was written, the greater will be one's comprehension of the work itself. Of course, we do not want history, as such, to usurp the place of the literary artifact; as in all such auxiliary studies, one investigates the social and political history of the period in which a play was written so as to understand the work better.

**Other disciplines.** There are any number of other disciplines that we can call upon in interpreting plays, in particular, and literary works in general. Again, these disciplines these should be approached with caution. Yet plays do treat human psychology; they have social dimensions; and they may embody certain religious tenets or philosophical beliefs. They may even have affinities with other arts or literary types. Verse plays, for example, are also poetry and can be looked at from the perspective of poetry. Many



critics approach all literary works from one or another point of view. Some apply Freudian or Freudian-based psychology in their interpretations; some consider certain plays as an expression of existentialist philosophy and other plays as exemplars of the Christian religion; others see all literary works in terms of their attitude toward social classes. Since dramatists frequently treat psychological, social, political, and religious matters in their plays, we can hardly rule out the aid derived from disciplines like psychology, sociology, religion, philosophy, and arts other than theater when we examine plays. As always, the key lies in maintaining a proper perspective on the literary work so that it does not become a mere excuse for our discovery of a favored theory or doctrine—Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, and the like.

## A Note on Organization

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Since students typically get essay assignments of the following kind, *Dramatic Analysis: A Reader on Western Drama* is designed to show them how, through carefully grouped, concrete examples, they might set about completing such assignments:

1. “Choose an important character in such-and-such a play and analyze his or her dramatic function. That is, why is this character in the play and what does he or she contribute to the development of its theme?”
2. “What type of structure does such-and-such a play have: climactic, episodic, or cyclical? From a thematic point of view, why did the playwright use such a structure?”
3. “Choose two plays that are similar in style, structure, or meaning and compare, as well as contrast, them. What are the differences in socio-historical context between the two works if they are plays from different periods? Is one of these works superior to the other, and, if so, why?”

As *Dramatic Analysis: A Reader on Western Drama* is divided into the sections “Plot and Action, or Form and Structure,” “Character and Role,” “Style and Genre,” “Language, Symbol, and Allusion,” “Theme, Thesis, Thought, or Idea,” “Comparison and Contrast,” “Re-evaluation and Influence,” and “Authorship and Adaptation” (naturally, with some overlap among the sections)—with each heading introduced by a “Key Analytical Question”—the reader can easily go to the appropriate section and find two specific examples of the kind of essay he or she has been assigned to write. Supplementing the essays in this book is a useful critical apparatus

consisting of a Step-by-Step Approach to Dramatic Analysis, a Glossary of Dramatic Terms, Study Guides, Topics for Writing and Discussion, a list of Bibliographical Resources, and a comprehensive index.

There remains to be said only a word about playreading and theatergoing. These activities should never be considered as mutually hostile. Reading is no substitute for the experience of a live performance; neither, however, is it a secondary or useless activity. Certainly, one will be a better reader of plays by becoming a spectator of productions; similarly, one will be a better spectator by becoming a reader. We must remember that good theatrical productions are the result of intelligent readings. There is, finally, an advantage enjoyed by the reader of plays. Once the performance is over, “these our actors,” as Prospero says in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (1611), prove to be “all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air.” For the reader, they may come back to life again, and again, on the printed page.

# A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO DRAMATIC ANALYSIS

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## I. Analysis of Plot and Action

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1. What are the given circumstances of the play's action? Geographical location? Historical period? Time of day? Economic environment? Political situation? Social milieu? Religious system?
2. From what perspective do we see the events of the play? Psychological? Ethical? Heroic? Religious? Political?
3. What has the dramatist selected of the possible events of the story to put into actual scenes? Which events are simply reported or revealed through exposition?
4. Drama is action and the essence of action is conflict. Insofar as a situation contains conflict, it is dramatic: no conflict, no drama. Drama is the process of *resolving* conflict, and what is most important in dramatic analysis is to perceive the conflict inherent in the play. Conflict creates characters, or characters—their opposing desires or needs—create conflict. To understand a dramatic text or playscript, it is necessary to discover and expose the conflict. What, then, is the conflict in the play in terms of opposing principles? What kinds of qualities are associated with either side, or with *all* sides? Or, considering the principal characters as “ideas” or ethical/moral agents, into what sort of dialectic can you convert the plot? What is opposing what?
5. Where has the dramatist pitched the emphasis in his story, as an unfolding action? (For example, the long and careful approach to the “kill” in *Hamlet* versus the relatively quick “kill” followed by the long and haunted aftermath in *Macbeth*.) What has happened

before the play, and what happens during the play? (For instance, the late point of attack in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, whose plot has a considerable past, versus the early point of attack in *King Lear*, in which the past is virtually nonexistent.)

6. How many acts and scenes are there? Did the play's author note them or were these divisions added later? What motivates the divisions of the play and how are they marked (curtains, blackouts, etc.)?
7. Are there subplots? If so, how is each related to the main action?
8. What alignments, parallels, or repetitions do you notice? (For example, the triple revenge plot in *Hamlet*; the blind Teiresias who can really "see" from the start as contrasted with the blind Oedipus who can really "see" only at the end of the play.)
9. What general or universal experience does the plot seem to be dramatizing?

## II. Analysis of Character

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1. Assuming that each character is *necessary* to the plot, what is the dramatic function of each? (For instance, why does Shakespeare give Hamlet a close friend, but no friend to Macbeth or Othello?)
2. Do several characters participate in the same "flaw" or kind of fallibility? (For example, Gloucester and Lear are both blind to the true nature of filial love.)
3. Is there a wide range of character "positions" respecting such antitheses as innocence-guilt, good-evil, honorableness-dishonorableness, reason-irrationality, etc.?
4. What qualities or aspects of character are stressed: the physical, the social, the psychological, or the moral or ethical? (For instance, Ibsen's "ethical" character versus Chekhov's character of "mood" or frustrated sensibility; Aeschylus's "grand," sculptural character versus Euripides' "psychopathic" character.)
5. How is character revealed? By symbols and imagery (Macbeth's preoccupation with blood and time)? By interaction with various other characters (Hamlet with Horatio and Ophelia)? By what the character says? By what others say about the character? By what the character does? (the most important). By descriptions of the character in the stage directions?

6. How do character traits activate the drama? (Note how a character's traits are invariably involved in his or her acts as motives for, or causes of, those acts.)
7. Consider each character as a "voice" in the play's overall dialectic, contributing to theme, idea, or meaning.
8. What evidence of change can you detect? What seems to have been the source of this change, and what does it signify for the play's theme or the final nature of the character's identity?
9. How is the character's change expressed dramatically? (For example, in a "recognition" speech, in a newfound attitude, in a behavioral gesture, etc.)

### III. Analysis of Language

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1. The dialogue is the primary means by which a play implies the total makeup of its imaginative world and describes the behavior of all the characters that populate that world. For any one passage of dialogue in a play, ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. What happens during this dialogue and as a result of this dialogue?
  - b. What does this passage reveal about the inner life and motives of each character?
  - c. What does this scene reveal about the relationships of the characters to each other?
  - d. What does this section reveal about the plot or about any of the circumstances contributing to the complication or resolution of the plot?
  - e. What are the most notable moments or statements in this dialogue?
  - f. Are there any implicit or unspoken matters in this scene that deserve attention?
  - g. What facial expressions, physical gestures, or bodily movements are implied by the dialogue?
  - h. What props or set pieces are explicitly or implicitly called for in the dialogue or the stage directions?
  - i. What vocal inflections or tone of voice does a line suggest?
  - j. Where might the characters increase or decrease the volume or speed of their delivery?

- k. Where might the characters pause in delivering their lines?
- l. Where might the characters stand on stage and in relation to each other at the beginning of the scene and at later points in the same scene?
2. Do all the characters use language in much the same way, or does each have his or her own verbal characteristics?
3. What are the dominant image patterns? (For instance, disease-decay-death imagery in *Hamlet*.)

Do characters seem to share a particular pattern, or is it exclusive to one character? (For example, Othello gradually begins to pick up Iago's sexual-bestial imagery as he becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt.)

4. What combinations or confluences of image patterns can you detect? (For instance, in *Hamlet*, in the lines "By the o'ergrowth of some complexion, / Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason," the imagery of cancer, or pollution by "overgrowth," is conflated with military imagery.)
5. Explain the presence of such rhetorical devices as: sudden shifts from verse to prose; rhymed couplets; "set" speeches that give the appearance of being standard or conventional (Polonius's advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*); choral speeches; formal "debates"; etc. These devices are often used to emphasize, or italicize, certain aspects of meaning and theme.
6. How, generally, would you distinguish the use of language and imagery in this play from that of other plays? (For example, dramatic verse speech tends, on the whole, to "recite" the content directly and faithfully, presenting all the implications on the word-surface; as dialogue in plays becomes more realistic—becomes prose, that is—particularly from the nineteenth century forward, there is an increasing rift between what is actually said and what is implied, or latent, in the language.)
7. In what ways does the language of the play—its imagery; style; tempo or rhythm; tone; descriptive, informational, or ideational content; and level of probability or internal consistency—help to create the sense of a unique "world," or circumscribed space, appropriate to this play and no other? (For instance, *Macbeth*'s dark, "metaphysical" space versus *Hamlet*'s dense and various world of objects, people, animals, and processes.)

## IV. General

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1. What is the dramatist's attitude toward the materials of his or her play? (Skeptical? Critical? Ironic? Sympathetic? Neutral or objective? Etc.)
2. What features or elements of the play seem to be the source of the dramatist's attitude? (A reasonable or reasoning character you can trust? A choral element? A didactic voice detectable in the content as a whole? An allegorical quality? The way in which the incidents are arranged? A set of symbols? A balance or equilibrium of opposed readings of the world?)
3. What is the nature of the play's world order? (Fatalistic? Benign? Malignant? Just? Neutral?) Another way of asking this: Are there *operative* gods, and what share of the responsibility for events do they hold?
4. What is the source of your impression of this world order? Remember that meaning in drama is usually *implied*, rather than stated directly. It is suggested by the relationships among the characters; the ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters; the conflicts and their resolution; and such devices as spectacle, music, and song. What, then, is the source of your impression of the play's meaning?
5. If the play departs from realism or representationalism, what devices are used to establish the internal logic of the action?
6. Are changes in the dramatic action paralleled by changes in visual elements such as lighting, costume, make-up, and scenery? How important is such visual detail to the dramatic action?
7. For what kind of theatrical space was the play intended by its author? Are some of the play's characteristics the result of dramatic conventions in use at the time the work was written?
8. How extensive are the stage directions? Were they written by the author or interpolated by someone else? What type of information do they convey? Are they important to the dramatic action?
9. Is the play a translation? Can you compare it to the original? Can you compare it with other translations? Are there significant differences between the source and a translation, such as the rendering of the author's original French verse in English prose?

10. Is there any difference between playing time (the time it takes to perform the play) and illusory time (the time the action is supposed to take)? What is the relationship between the two, if any?
11. Is there anything special about the title? Does it focus on a character, the setting, or a theme? Is it taken from a quotation or is it an allusion? Does the title contain a point of view, suggest a mood, or otherwise “organize” the action of the play?
12. Does the play clearly fall into one of the major dramatic categories (tragedy, comedy, etc.)? What conventional features of its type does the play exhibit (subject matter, situations, character types)? Does knowledge of the genre contribute to an understanding of this play?



# MODEL ESSAYS



## 1. PLOT AND ACTION, OR FORM AND STRUCTURE.

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Key Analytical Question: “What type of dramatic structure or method does a particular play use, and how does this structure or method help to express the writer’s meaning?”

### “Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*: A New View”

Ireland made no contribution to the stage in modern times until the last decade of the nineteenth century. Then it roused itself in response to nationalistic promptings and in time gave the world not only the superb repertory company of the Abbey Theatre, but a number of dramatic masterpieces as well. They were the product of the Irish Literary Theatre, a new theatrical movement launched in Dublin between 1899 and 1902 by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, and dedicated to developing a native Irish drama that would “bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland” (Gregory, 8). This group, whose playhouse became the Abbey Theatre in 1904, deliberately aimed to set itself apart from the realistic and naturalistic drama of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Zola that was then thriving on the continent as well as in England, seeking instead to echo the richly evocative language of Irish experience.

The frequently literal, uninspired dramaturgy of realism and naturalism at their most didactic had already led to a neo-romantic, even symbolist revolt under Maeterlinck and Rostand in the 1890s, but this insurgence was beginning to lose its vitality by the first decade of the new century. And it fell to the playwrights of a still untamed, unstandardized country such as Ireland to revivify the drama by combining the best elements of romanticism and representationalism. One of those new writers, John Millington Synge (pronounced “Sing”), became modern Ireland’s first great playwright. Synge may have been theoretically or temperamentally in favor of romanticism,

and his last play, the lyrical tragedy *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910)—whose full-length dramatization of Irish legend the author did not live to put into final form—is Ireland’s greatest romantic drama. Yet he acquired such a singular sensitivity to the nuances of common peasant life that most of his work provided a perfect fusion of living reality and folk imagination. This it did by tapping the lively and lilting Irish idiom spoken especially by country people.

When Synge complained about the “modern intellectual drama” and its “joyless and pallid works” (67) in his famous preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), he was really complaining about the degeneration of language that accompanied the rise of cities and the development of technology. As life became easier, more comfortable, more organized, more *rational*, language gradually deteriorated from a powerful poetic response or even *challenge* to nature, to a weak, pedestrian *accommodation* of society. Language became just another tool in the manipulation of the world instead of the primary means for self-expression and self-assertion. Once this happened, Synge argued, the theatre became a place for the exchange of ideas, as with Ibsen, but not for the communication of the joy, the emotion—indeed, the vicarious freedom and gratification—that is vigorous, beautiful language. And “in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living,” he continued in the *Playboy’s* preface, “it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form” (67).

Little in John Millington Synge’s Protestant, landed-gentry background, however, could have suggested such a “poetic” future for him. Born in Rathfarmham, now a Dublin suburb, on April 16, 1871, the youngest of five children in an Anglo-Irish family, Synge was raised in the rigors of his mother’s evangelical Christianity. His father, a barrister who had inherited some property in County Galway, died a year after his last child’s birth, and the boy eventually found his mother’s Calvinistic view of life so oppressive that he renounced Christianity when he was sixteen. A frail and sickly child, Synge was educated by tutors at home and in private schools. But the young man improved his health by taking long tramping trips through the nearby Dublin and Wicklow mountains, and there he developed an intense interest in nature that is reflected not only in his plays, but also in two prose works that form a background to them: *The Aran Islands* (1907) and *In Wicklow, West Kerry, and Connemara* (1911).

In 1888 Synge entered Dublin’s Trinity College, where four years later he took a bachelor’s degree in the Gaelic and Hebrew languages. Afterwards he settled in Paris to learn French and Italian at the Sorbonne at the same time

that he wrote poetry. Leading a somewhat Bohemian life and augmenting his slender means through book-reviewing, Synge thus seemed headed for the rather futile career of an Irish émigré and aesthete. But on December 21, 1896, he had a prophetic encounter with Yeats (described in Synge's preface to *The Well of the Saints* [written 1903; produced 1905, at the Abbey] as well as in Yeats's *Essays and Introductions* [1961]), who gave him the following advice:

Give up Paris, you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression. (Synge, *Plays: Book I*, 63)

Within two years, Synge finally abandoned his desire for a literary career in Paris and acted on Yeats's advice, spending each summer from 1898 to 1902 on the Aran Islands, about thirty miles from Galway off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. There he immersed himself in the life of the peasantry and kept a journalistic record of his impressions (published in *The Aran Islands*), which would provide him with the themes, plots, characterizations, and language of the six plays he wrote between 1902 and 1909. Further travels in the western countries of Ireland steeped Synge in the life of the most colorful and eloquent country-folk of the British Isles. These people on the west coast, like those of Aran, were primitively close to the plain realities of labor with barren soil and struggle with violent seas; yet the dignity and joy with which such peasants endured hardship clearly stimulated Synge's imagination, as did the wild richness of their colloquial speech, which he sought to echo in his plays and which he justly celebrated in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Meanwhile, a fortunate coincidence of events hastened Synge's permanent return to Ireland, where, in 1902, he was invited to join the Irish Literary Theatre, for which he wrote his plays, as well as directed, over the next seven years. In the 1897 prospectus for the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats had declared that he and his associates hoped

to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience, trained to listen by its passion for oratory. . . . We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. (Gregory, 8-9)

It was John Synge who showed the way to Yeats and to the Irish as he became, on the basis of two poetic tragedies together with four dark and even tragic comedies, the Abbey's first great playwright.

His first produced play, presented by the Irish National Theatre Society at Dublin's Molesworth Hall in 1903, was the macabre yet amusing *In the Shadow of the Glen* (written 1902). Based on a folk tale that Synge had heard in the Aran Islands, this one-act is about an old husband who feigns death to discover whether his young peasant wife is unfaithful. As in the playwright's subsequent serio-comedies, the farcical, even irreverent, humor of *In the Shadow of the Glen* is frequently accompanied by a contrasting mood of frustration or defeat. Young Nora may rebel against a loveless marriage and abandon her "dead" old husband, but there can be no bright future ahead as she leaves for the open road and damp ditches with the romantic, poetic, "natural" Tramp. Her departure was viewed as an insult to Irish womanhood by Irish patriots, made oversensitive by their struggle for national independence. Not for the last time in Synge's brief career, these militants mistook his keen irony for malicious intent to defame the Irish and their political sense.

The playwright's next naturalistic comedy was the earthy and exuberant *Tinker's Wedding* (written 1903; produced 1903, in London), in which he dramatized the comic predicament of a tinker woman who wants to regularize, through marriage, her relationship with a man by whom she has had many children. Not produced in Ireland until nearly fifty years after its creation, on account of its irreverent portrayal of a country priest as grasping and hypocritical, this two-act, like the rest of Synge's plays, reveals his profound distrust of established religion; but *The Tinker's Wedding*, for its part, may seek too patently to show the superiority of the gypsy tinkers' "natural" religion to that represented by organized Catholicism. Nonetheless, the play is colored by its own comic ironies as Sarah not only loses her chance for a proper Christian marriage—due chiefly to the shrewd irresponsibility of her randy old mother—but also has a Latin curse called down on her superstitious head by the frustrated, manhandled, and terrified cleric.

Similarly, in a bleakly satiric parable on human frailty such as *The Well of the Saints*, for example, the religious miracle that temporarily restores the sight of the blind, married, physically ugly beggars Martin and Mary Doul only serves to expose their vanities and fantasies, as well as the cruelties of the villagers who have tormented them. Synge's first attempt at the three-act dramatic form, *The Well of the Saints* is notable for its brutality (which the playwright thought essential to art) and for its inquiry into the nature and relationship of illusion and reality. For the blind and physically ugly Martin and Mary have been deceived by the village's inhabitants into believing they are beautiful. When their sight is temporarily restored by the waters of a miraculous well administered by a saint, the harshness of reality and the realization of the villagers' deceit cause the couple to quarrel and drift apart. Blind again after their cure wears off, they unite again but reject the saint's

offer of permanent sight. Thus do they abandon the grossly imperfect world of reality for a consciously chosen world of perfect illusion, which husband Martin sustains through his flights of poetic imagination. Thus also does Synge comment wryly on mankind's need for protective self-delusion.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge continued to play seriously with the themes of imagination and reality—specifically, the clash between the Playboy's world of dream or illusion and the peasants' world of prosaic reality unredeemed by the imagination. The pinnacle of Synge's achievement in the comedy of bitter and ironic yet poetic realism, this three-act play provoked a week of riots when it was first produced at the Abbey Theatre in 1907, to be followed by similar disturbances at *The Playboy's* American première in 1911. (Recall the hysteria that greeted the first production of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* [1830], with its violation of the formal alexandrine, or the angry reaction to the treatment of syphilis and incest in Ibsen's *Ghosts* [1881].) Synge's Irish countrymen, as well as Irish Americans, evidently thought that his play was a deliberate defamation of their national character, a depiction of them as a foul-mouthed, even violently degenerate, group of country bumpkins.

Yet perhaps it was a measure of the dramatist's artistic success that he had offended the right people by refusing to view his countrymen through a haze of sentimental idealism. For, in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the repressed, desolate people of Maya village (in West Ireland) exalt the deed of patricide and transform the purported killer—the whining, self-pitying Christy Mahon—into a triumphant playboy in return for his transformation of their lives. But Christy's heroic stature is ultimately shattered by the appearance of his unsteady and bloody, yet very much alive, father, whom the son tries to murder a second time. What had appeared to the townsfolk as a grandiose, courageous accomplishment from a distance, however, becomes outrageous and horrid behavior when performed in their own backyard. As Christy's would-be-bride, Pegeen Mike, proclaims, “there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (119), and she along with the others prepares to hang him. It is as if Christy Mahon has forced the village to recognize within themselves the imaginative appeal of violating so ancient and powerful a taboo (if only from afar), one whose treatment in *The Playboy* may be seen as a comic variation on the theme of patricide as embodied in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (430 B.C.). Imagination has worked powerfully on the lives of everyone in Synge's play, then—not least Christy, now a new man, or a boy-become-a-man, as he bravely rises up against his hangmen and becomes the master of his father. Returning with Old Mahon to their farm at the end, the son exults at the way he'll “go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgment Day” (121). For poor

Pegeen, though, this comic reversal turns to tragedy as she cries out, in the play's final lines, "Oh my grief . . . I've lost the only playboy of the Western World" (121).

The one work of Synge's aside from the mythological or legendary *Deirdre of the Sorrows* that is unrelenting in its tragic intensity, with none of the boisterous or robust humor found in his other plays, is *Riders to the Sea* (written 1902; produced 1904, at Molesworth Hall). The first success that Synge produced for the Abbey Theatre and often called one of the finest one-act dramas, if not the finest, ever written in English, *Riders* exhibits, more than Synge's serio-comedies, the influence of the Aran Islands on his art. Yet this short play also furnishes the best evidence that, in spite of his Rousseauist love of nature, its author was not a naïve worshipper and champion of the primitive. He sensed the tragic possibilities inherent in natural inexorability and, indeed, *Riders* may be the only one-act play in dramatic history that can be called a tragedy in the fullest sense. Nonetheless, in its economy of form and simplicity or baldness of passion, it resembles Hermann Heijerman's Dutch play *The Good Hope* (1900), bears comparison with the Spaniard Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1933), and influenced Brecht's *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (1937) as well as Derek Walcott's *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954). Furthermore, like these plays, *Riders* is naturalistic in conception, with a protagonist from a lower social rung who is to a large extent the victim of economic necessity. Hers is a society where it is so difficult to make a living that the menfolk are compelled to take what often prove to be fatal risks as they fish or transport their livestock to market on the roughest of seas.

The central character of Synge's play is Maurya, an old Aran-Islander woman who has lost her husband, father-in-law, and five sons to the treacherous sea. *Riders to the Sea* opens as Maurya's two chorus-voiced daughters, Cathleen and Nora, receive clothing from the body of a drowned man and identify him as their fifth brother, Michael, who has been missing for nine days. Meanwhile, Bartley, Maurya's last and youngest son, prepares for a journey to a horse fair on the mainland, setting off despite his mother's entreaties and even her withholding of her blessing. Then, in a prophetic vision of death at a spring well, Maurya claims to have seen Bartley riding down to the sea on a red mare, with her son Michael behind him on a gray pony. The terrible vision is presently fulfilled when the old woman learns not only that Michael's body has been identified, but also that Bartley has been knocked into the sea by the gray pony and drowned.

The final third of the play is an extended threnody in which the mother and her two daughters preside over Bartley's wake. As Maurya commemorates all of her dead men in a series of mighty laments, her youngest boy's demise becomes a symbol of every man's death, even as the sea becomes a symbol



of implacable mortality and she herself turns into the emblematic, sorrow-laden mother of us all. In her penultimate speech, Maurya transcends her grievous loss through the following heroic yet ironic reflection: “They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me . . . and I won’t care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. . . . It’s a great rest I’ll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it’s only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking” (23, 25).

Although *Riders to the Sea* may depict the sufferings of a superstitious peasant woman, it contains the same kind of intense drama found in ancient Greek tragedies. In fact, the play moves with an intensity that can only be achieved by poetic means, and, although *Riders* is not technically poetic drama as were the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, it is one of the finest twentieth-century examples of poetry of the theater (to be distinguished, in Cocteau’s terms, from poetry *in* the theater, as discussed in the preface to his 1921 play *The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower*). The rhythmic, imagistic language of Synge’s play, while not in verse, adds to its overall effect—which can be seen as the effect of marrying richness to austerity, prodigality of imagination to poverty of means, peasant colloquialism to princely feeling. Technically, Aran Islanders speak both Gaelic and English, but partly as a result of being cast in the “foreign” syntax of Gaelic (as in “There’s someone after crying out by the seashore” [21]), their second language of English is marked by a very expressive and idiosyncratic flavor.

It is also marked by the quality of inevitability: since death is almost a way of life among the islanders, their language cannot help but be affected by its presence. At one point, for example, Nora says, “And it’s destroyed he’ll [Bartley] be going till dark night, and he after eating nothing since the sun went up” (11). “Destroyed” means in this context “fatigued” or “exhausted,” but it also carries the meaning of “killed,” so that the ending of the play is suggested by Nora’s line. A little later Cathleen says, “Let you [Maurya] go down now to the spring well and give him [Bartley] this bread and he passing” (13), and we get the same effect. “Passing” means “passing by,” but it can also mean “dying or passing away.” Trying to open the bundle of clothes the priest gave to Nora, Cathleen says to her sister, “Give me a knife . . . the string’s perished with the salt water, and there’s a black knot on it you wouldn’t loosen in a week” (15). “Perished” here means “contracted and hardened,” but again, even though it refers to the string and not to Bartley himself, “perished” contributes to the death imagery that moves us forward to the end of the play. It is as if the islanders speak the language of death in recognition of death’s looming and ineradicable presence in their lives—almost in defiance of such presence.

This recognition carries over into their use of adjectives as well as verbs. Note in the above examples the phrases “dark night” and “black knot.” “Dark night” is preceded by Maurya’s “black night” (11), but the word “night” clearly implies darkness or blackness, so there is no real need to preface it with the adjective “dark” or “black.” Yet the islanders do, and in the context of *Riders to the Sea* these adjectives forebode something bad or harmful. The family’s pig has “black feet” (9); Michael’s body is found in the sea near “the black cliffs of the north” (15), where “black hags” (17) fly about; and there is a “black [exceedingly hard to undo] knot” (15) in the string that ties Michael’s bundle of clothes. The word “black” thus becomes a kind of leitmotif in the dialogue, preparing us subliminally for the death of Bartley that we know must come at the end of the play. We see this “black” even in the gray pony of death that knocks Bartley from the red mare of life into the sea.

Like Greek tragedy, then, *Riders to the Sea* is permeated by a feeling of fatality or impending doom, which is embodied not only in its heightened language but also in the character of Maurya. (Her name itself is remarkably close in sound to *moira*, the Greek word for “fate.”) She senses the inevitability of the premature death of her sixth son on the sea; and that feeling of inevitability is heightened by the discussion between her daughters about their missing brother Michael, by their identification of a piece of his clothing recovered from the sea, and by the willful insistence of the last son and brother, Bartley, that he ride his horses down into the sea to meet the Galway boat (which must anchor far offshore because of the tides and shallows off the island).

No sooner is Michael’s death established than Maurya enters keening because she claims to have seen Michael riding the gray pony behind Bartley’s red mare. The reversal that Synge achieves here—in apparent contradiction to the literal truth that Michael is dead—is linked to the recognition by all three women that Bartley himself will die. Aristotle claimed that *Oedipus the King* contained the finest kind of recognition (*anagnorisis*), which was accompanied by a simultaneous reversal (*peripeteia*), and Synge achieves his own kind of recognition-reversal divided among Maurya, Nora, and Cathleen. Not by accident, they are rough Irish equivalents of the Greek Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who were supposed to preside over birth, marriage, and death: Clotho spun the thread of life, Lachesis measured its length, and Atropos cut it. When *Riders to the Sea* opens, Cathleen’s rapid spinning is interrupted by Nora’s news that they must identify the drowned man’s clothes. Tellingly, Cathleen stops her wheel “with a sudden movement,” and later she cuts the string tying the clothes with a sharp knife. It is Nora who identifies them as Michael’s, on the basis of four dropped stitches in a sock—a sock that she herself knitted for him. And it is Maurya who not

only gave birth to Bartley, but who also withholds bread as well as blessing from him at the spring well—a gesture that makes clear her awareness that his allotted time on earth has come to an end. Indeed, Maurya had sealed the tragic inevitability of Bartley's fate even as he left the house, when, instead of giving him her blessing, she cried out, "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again" (11).

What of the Catholic element in *Riders to the Sea*, as opposed to its pagan overtones? For the Aran Islanders certainly have a monotheistic religion, and it is Catholicism. God is referred to often in *Riders* ("God help her," "Lord knows," "The blessing of God on you," "God forgive us"), but God is curiously powerless in this play, and His powerlessness is called attention to all the more by the frequency with which His name appears in the dialogue. Nora reports early in the play that the priest refused to stop Bartley from going all the way to Galway fair on this particular day with the words, "Let you not be afraid. Herself does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living" (5). When Nora tells her mother what the priest has said after her mother's return from the spring well and her vision, Maurya retorts, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea" (21). One could gloss this line of Maurya's as follows: "Men who live by the sea and not by the Chapel know it's little the sea cares for God or man." My point here is that, although the Aran Islanders have religion and pray often, they recognize a force over which God has no control. And as a result, Synge has created a tragic drama for them that satisfies a special need *not* satisfied by their religion. Paradoxically, *Riders* makes meaning of nature for the Aran Islanders, makes nature accessible or tolerable to them, in its protest against the *meaninglessness* of nature's ways—its going the ever-present potential of the sea for mindless destruction one better by going it one worse and having all of Maurya's men destroyed by the sea. Similarly, ancient tragedy made meaning of nature and existence for the Greeks in the absence in the fifth century B.C. of a body of theology or religious dogma. (Greek religious practice seems to have evolved, up to this time, principally to help achieve through ritual an empathetic response from nature, but not to try to make sense of it and of life.)

The simplicity, dignity, and solemnity of *Riders to the Sea*, not to speak of its observance of the unities of time, place, and action, have more than once caused over-zealous critics to exclaim, with Yeats, after seeing the play: "Sophocles! No, Aeschylus!" (quoted in Robinson, 43). The history of this one-act's criticism, however, indicates that not all commentators agree with Yeats's praise. James Joyce, for one, was troubled by the brevity of *Riders*; others, struck by its seeming lack of structure or plot, did not hesitate to call the work a tone poem or static drama. And, indeed, *Riders* is to some

extent a vindication of the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck's theory of static drama, inasmuch as its catastrophe does not take place onstage, there is a supernatural component to its occurrence, and much of the drama or dramatic tension lies in the waiting for news of the expected disaster. (It must be pointed out, however, that the possibility—and value—of drama-without-plot was first championed not by Maeterlinck but by the European, “slice of life” naturalists about a quarter of a century before Synge began to write plays.)

Still other critics appear to cite the play's natural stasis as the reason for denying it tragic status. Ronald Peacock, for example, finds that, despite its depiction of “Sea and Tempest hanging like Fate over men's lives, [*Riders to the Sea*] has nothing whatsoever of the complexity of the tragic processes in human life which we find handled and mastered by the greatest writers” (110). Robert Heilman, for his part, writes that “the dominant effect [*of Riders*] is one of pathos, and its import is limited”; he calls the play an example of a special type of melodrama, the “drama of disaster” (38-39), in which the characters are victims either of nature (as in *Riders*), society, the self, political forces, or evil men. And Denis Donoghue, applying to *Riders* Francis Fergusson's conception of tragic rhythm (itself borrowed from Kenneth Burke), as moving from purpose through passion (or pain arising from action) to perception, finds that the play comes up short:

At any stage, the taking by Maurya of a positive course of action is impossible because the scales are too heavily weighted against her (a human conflict is one thing, but conflict between an old woman and the Sea is another). For this reason, action is frustrated, purpose cannot even be formulated. The play ends in Maurya's Acceptance, rather than in any positive perception. (57)

What these critics have in common is the belief that, since Maurya cannot possibly win or just “break even” against such an adversary as the sea, there can be no tragedy. Of course Maurya cannot possibly win in any contest with the sea, even as Oedipus cannot win his contest with Fate. The point, however, is not whether Maurya can win, but how she loses—how she tries to beat the sea at its own game, so to speak, and loses even at that. Any satisfactory interpretation of *Riders to the Sea* must, then, take into serious account what happens at the spring well, when Bartley is riding down to the sea. For Maurya both *wants* and does not want Bartley to be drowned, therein lies her tragedy, and nowhere is this more clear than in her report of her response, or rather lack of response, to Bartley at the spring well.

This old woman, after all, knows the sea to be an implacable enemy; for her the issue is not *if* the sea will take Bartley, but *when* it will take him. She

has to decide whether, at her age, she can wait out the death-by-drowning of her last and youngest son—after all, her own husband and father-in-law were hardly young men when the sea took them—or whether she would like the sea to take Bartley this time and be done once and for all with worrying about what the sea can do to her life, her family, her loved men next. It is a tragic dilemma in which Maurya finds herself, and, Denis Donoghue to the contrary, she does take action.

She goes to the spring well to meet Bartley on his way down to the sea to catch the boat to Connemara, but Maurya does not give him her blessing, as intended, and she does not give him his bread. She says, “I tried to say, ‘God speed you,’ but something choked the words in my throat” (19). She wants to give her blessing, but cannot do so. In other words, Maurya both wants Bartley to live and does not wish him to survive. By her (in)action, however, she does not want him to live. Through her vision of Michael sitting atop the gray pony—this vision itself being a form of action—Maurya wills Bartley’s death. Yet she does not expect his body to be found (having no idea that her son’s death will occur in such a way as to make his body comparatively easy to retrieve). Maurya makes this clear when she declares, as Bartley leaves her cottage for what turns out to be the last time, “. . . we’ll not see him again” (11), and also when she laments, upon returning from her vision at the spring well, “Bartley will be lost now” (21).

Strangely, Maurya holds out hope that *Michael’s* body will wash up on their island, even though he has been lost at sea for nine days. She has even bought new white boards for his coffin, so certain, or at least so hopeful, is she that his body will be found. Her youngest daughter, Nora, tells us that Maurya was fonder of Michael than of Bartley, and thus this elderly mother seems to want to finalize her “great rest” (25) from the anguish of death-in-life through the burial of her favored son. What she gets for her tragic error, for wanting Bartley’s disappearance at sea and Michael’s, is Bartley’s body and Michael’s drowning far away from home. (He is buried, presumably in an unmarked grave, in the far north where he was found.) Maurya realizes her error—yet another recognition-cum-reversal—and probably suffers more than she ever has before over the drowning of one of her men when Cathleen hands her what is left of Michael’s clothes, as evidence that he has indeed been found in the far north.

Synge has Maurya stand up slowly at this point and take Michael’s shirt and sock in her hands, in order to symbolize the dawning of the truth on, or the receiving of knowledge by, her. Shortly afterwards, the playwright has Maurya drop Michael’s clothes across the feet of Bartley’s retrieved body, and I take this gesture to mean that she is symbolically placing *Michael* at Bartley’s feet, to atone for her past placing of the retrieval of Michael’s body

ahead of Bartley's survival at sea. (It is Bartley who will now have a coffin made from the white boards that were originally intended for Michael.) After sprinkling Bartley's body with Holy Water, Maurya kneels down and prays for a while, then "stands up again very slowly and spreads out the pieces of Michael's clothes beside [his brother's] body" (25). Her standing up slowly here repeats her standing up slowly when she received Michael's clothes from Cathleen, and again suggests her gradual realization of the truth, her slow climbing to a vantage point from which to view her situation clearly and fully. She knows better now than to favor one son over the other, so instead of leaving "Michael" at Bartley's feet, she places his clothes alongside his brother's body, as if they contained a body themselves. She makes Michael equal to Bartley, in other words—going as far as to sprinkle his clothes with the last of the Holy Water, even as she did the body of Bartley.

Malcolm Pittock has called *Riders to the Sea* the tragedy of a community, in which the characters "are not so much individuals as typical representatives of that community" (446), and nowhere is the play's communality more apparent than in the spreading throughout its community of five, including a priest, of a responsibility for Bartley's drowning clearly centered in Maurya. In the play's rising action, for instance, Cathleen keeps the knowledge of the retrieval of Michael's body in the far north from Maurya by not producing the shirt and sock brought by the priest for identification *before* Bartley leaves for Connemara. Cathleen may do this out of compassion for Maurya, for—on the advice of the priest to Nora—she does not want to rekindle Maurya's grief, as well as her hope, if the clothes are not Michael's. But the result is tragic; without the knowledge that Michael's corpse has been found in the north, Maurya continues to hope that the body of her favorite son will wash up on shore, while she both refuses to give her blessing to Bartley and envisions his death at the spring well so as to be done forever with waiting for the sea to take one of her men.

Ironically, the sisters choose at first not to reveal the identification of Michael's clothes to Maurya even when she returns from the well, because "maybe it's easier she'll be after giving her blessing to Bartley" (17), and it's "easy" they will want her to remain during the time he is on the sea. Bartley, for his part, contributes to his own doom because he insists on going to Connemara despite rough seas. He feels that he must go, because "this is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be a good fair for horses . . ." (9); he is the family's sole support, and support the family he will. Maurya feels that Bartley should stay behind precisely because he *is* the family's sole support, and if he should drown on the rough seas, they will be destitute. So this elderly mother twice refuses to give her youngest



of six sons a blessing, not only because she wants finally to end her losing battle with the sea for the men in her life, but also, it would seem, because she wants to punish the “hard and cruel” (11) Bartley for going against her parental will. Paradoxically in this “tragedy of a community,” Maurya’s willing of or wishing for Bartley’s death has been an interior, private action, largely uncommunicated to or undebated by those around her. Perhaps it is not even fully conscious on her part, so extreme an act is it—equal in its extremity or outrageousness, one might add, to the sacrifice of all Maurya’s sons, her husband, and her father-in-law to the sea’s cruel insatiability.

This little tragedy does not, of course, suggest its author’s comic genius—particularly as displayed in *The Playboy of the Western World*—but *Riders to the Sea* is thoroughly representative of the dour temperament with which Synge viewed life in his plays, even the comedies. A mild and retiring intellectual who surprised John Masefield and others by the contrast between his appearance and the trenchancy of his work, Synge nevertheless had the right *dramatic* temperament. Yeats described it well when he wrote of his friend that he favored “all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy.” Yeats added sagely, “The food of the spiritual-minded is sweet, an Indian scripture says, but passionate minds love bitter food” (“Synge and the Ireland of His Time,” 236-237).

Everything that has “edge” prevails in Synge’s plays; “bitter food” appears in them as well. He may not have been as cynical as was charged by his enemies and, in fact, much compassion of an unsentimental nature can be found in his writing; but a trace of disillusionment and acerbity does run through most of his work. Although in reacting against Ibsenism, Synge deplored the fact that “in these days the playhouse is too often stocked with the drugs of many seedy problems” (Preface to *The Tinker’s Wedding*, 123), life itself was a “problem” to him. He was a poet with the eye of a realist, that is, or a realist with a poet’s talent for transforming common ore into gold.

As for his own life, a real shadow hovered over Synge’s dramatic genius. Afflicted with chronic asthma and suffering the symptoms of Hodgkin’s disease from 1897, he was productive only between 1902 and 1909. And although he fell in love with and became engaged to the actress Molly Allgood (whose stage name was Marie O’Neill) in 1906, recurrent outbreaks of his illness—followed by a final, desperate operation in 1908—prevented their marriage. John Millington Synge died in Dublin on March 24, 1909, his life cut short at thirty-eight years but his art made “long” through its fusion of, or tension between, poetic imagination and dramatic structure, peasant reality and heroic myth, Irish ethnicity and universal humanity.

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## “Laughing Boy, Serious Girl: Behan’s *The Hostage* Reconsidered”

Written in 1958, *The Hostage* was Brendan Behan’s second full-length play. Behan had originally written the play in Gaelic with the title *An Giall*, on commission for Gael-Linn, an organization whose aim was the revival of Irish culture and language. The English version was first produced by Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop on October 14, 1958, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East; it later moved to London’s West End, opening at Wyndham’s Theatre on July 11, 1959. The critics Kenneth Tynan, Milton Shulman, Penelope Gilliatt, and Harold Hobson all praised the play as well as Littlewood’s directing, and in the next two years the production found success in Paris and New York. Unfortunately, *The Hostage* was the last of Behan’s plays to be staged in his lifetime: he was only forty-one when he died of acute alcoholism on March 20, 1964.

*The Hostage* grew out of Behan’s experiences as a member of the Irish Republican Army, just as *The Quare Fellow* (1954) had grown from his experiences in Dublin’s Mountjoy, where he was imprisoned from 1942 to 1946 for shooting at a policeman. The play hardly glorifies the I.R.A., however. Set in a Dublin brothel in the late 1950s, *The Hostage* in fact satirizes the Irish Republican Army’s fanatical nationalism and senseless glorification of the past, while asserting through song, dance, and love (between the Irish maid Teresa and the English soldier Leslie) the worth and community of all human souls. Leslie, the hostage of the title, is to be shot in reprisal by the I.R.A. if one of its members being held in a Belfast jail is executed by the British. Leslie’s captors themselves are hostages of the past, of a political program that has lost its urgency in a world threatened by economic depression, on the one hand, and nuclear destruction, on the other. That the I.R.A.’s headquarters in *The Hostage* is a brothel, moreover, is its own comment on the iniquity and frivolousness of this organization’s cause.

*The Hostage* has less a structure than a framework around which action is improvised; the interruption of its action by songs and direct address was nothing new in 1958; and the play’s language, though colorful, is often too literal. *The Hostage* is of interest in the history of the theater, therefore, not for its literary merit or originality, but for the production given it by Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop, which was a landmark in the elevation of the director to superstar status in the twentieth century. Here is a description of Littlewood’s method of working, as provided by Ulick O’Connor:

Once she got a script, she went into instant collaboration with the cast and, as their views of the play unfolded during rehearsal,

she allowed them to interpolate suggestions for dialogue and even scenes that were later incorporated in it. She once said that she did not believe in “the supremacy of the director-designer-actor or even *the writer*.” She relied a great deal on intuition and sudden flairs of inspiration. Sometimes this worked and it heightened the effect of what the playwright was trying to say. Sometimes it destroyed its meaning. (195-196)

Behan had been very late delivering *The Hostage* to Littlewood; though translated into English, the play was not in a form that satisfied him. Because he was often drunk at rehearsals, however, he indirectly encouraged Littlewood to make the changes and additions that he should have made himself. The result was a play different in tone and emphasis from *An Giall*, a bawdy satire rather than a delicate tragicomedy; and it has never been clear which version Behan preferred. What is indisputable is that Littlewood made the play in part her own, tempering its realism with Brechtian devices and thus casting the audience more in the role of thinking observer or witness of the action than feeling recipient of it. By adding song, dance, and wild humor, moreover, she widened *The Hostage*’s appeal at the same time that she both underlined the irrepressibility of the human spirit at its core and called attention, by contrast, to the deadly issue with which the play deals.

Given the fact that, in 1997, members of the Provisional I.R.A. who did not accept the peace process (and with it an Ireland that continued to be divided) split off to form the “Real I.R.A.,” and that in 2011 the Provisionals announced a resumption of hostilities, it should be evident that a production of *The Hostage* is as timely now as it was over sixty-five years ago. But this play addresses the subjects of nationalism, colonialism, and terrorism in general as well as the British-Irish conflict; its lessons are as applicable to the Middle East as they are to Ireland. I should like, then, in the following pages to discuss three elements of *The Hostage* that are crucial to a proper understanding and an intelligent production of it.

To my knowledge, no commentators on the play discuss the alliance of Mulleady, Princess Grace, and Rio Rita and their ultimate revelation of themselves as secret policemen. Presumably, this is because critics see such a disclosure as a cheap device to end the drama—cheap in the sense that it suddenly negates the homosexual relationship between Grace and Rita, out of which the playwright Behan has got much theatrical mileage; and cheap in the literal sense that it removes the need to hire extra actors to portray the police.

First, the alliance of these three men should come as no great surprise, since their very names suggest that they are in league. Grace and Rita are obviously women’s names, and Mulleady, when pronounced correctly,

sounds like the Anglo-Irish version of “my lady.” Second, the fact that the three are secret policemen fits in with the rest of the secrecy being practiced throughout *The Hostage*: the I.R.A. itself is commonly known as “the secret army,” and it has its headquarters in the play in a brothel, where secretive sex is transacted. Secret police methods are used, in other words, to combat illegal military action and illicit sexual acts.

Finally, Mulleady, Princess Grace, and Rio Rita say in song that all three are “queer,” even though only the latter two behave like homosexuals. The song is sung in response to Meg’s question, “What are they [the three men] up to?” (172) and to Pat’s statement, “I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could fling them” (172). Further, it contains the refrain “We’re here because we’re queer / Because we’re queer because we’re here” (172). They are in a brothel, in other words, not because of any homosexual tendencies, but because they are “queer”—that is, they “[differ] in some odd way from what is usual or normal,” and for this reason are “questionable, suspicious.”<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the song, the three raid the house of prostitution and reveal their true identities. Unlike the rest of the place’s inhabitants, they are opposed to the I.R.A. and empowered by law to arrest its members and sympathizers. The homosexuality of Grace and Rita and the eccentricity of Mulleady—among other acts, he takes the Christian social worker Miss Gilchrist up to his room for sex, which they follow with a discussion of religion—should therefore be viewed primarily as exaggerated external traits designed to set them apart at once from the whores, pimps, and customers in the brothel.

In a production of *The Hostage* like Joan Littlewood’s, which emphasized the kind of theatricality and spectacle exemplified by the behavior and appearance of Mulleady, Princess Grace, and Rio Rita, it is curious that the visual possibilities of *An Giall*’s ending were not exploited. Instead, Leslie is accidentally shot amid the pandemonium of the police raid; since the lights go out at the same time that the raid begins, he falls dead on a stage whose darkness is only intermittently lighted by explosions and gunfire outside the brothel. In *An Giall*, there is a large press (Irish English for “cupboard”) in the room in which Leslie is kept—a press that does not appear in *The Hostage*. During the police raid, he is hurriedly bound, gagged, and hidden in the press by his captors, the Irish Republican Army Officer and the Volunteer; by the time the raid is over and they can remove him, he has accidentally died of suffocation. The point is that Leslie’s captors hide him so that he will not be found by the Irish police. The I.R.A. men are not trying to save Leslie; they are trying to hold on to him as a hostage and bargaining chip, yet at the same time appear guiltless of kidnapping him.

Implementing this ending in a production of *The Hostage* would require some rewriting at the end and dramatic preparation for the press’s use.<sup>2</sup> What

is good about *An Giall*'s ending is that it gives a strong visual image of a hostage: someone bound and gagged and completely helpless. It also gives a strong picture of what Ireland's being held hostage by its sectarian past has done: suffocate the possibility of amicable relations between England and Ireland, as symbolized by the love affair between Leslie and Teresa. The problem with the *An Giall* ending is that it places responsibility for Leslie's death squarely in the hands of the I.R.A. men who placed him in the press—however much they did not intend to kill him by doing so. One loses, as a result, the irony of Leslie's being killed by a random bullet: in other words, by the situation as a whole that exists between England and Ireland, and between the legal government of Ireland and the Irish Republican Army.

My own feeling, however, is that the ending from *An Giall* would not only have better served Littlewood's production, it also better serves the play. Leslie's dead body, properly displayed on stage (ideally it should be erect for a few moments, then fall), becomes a stunning national or supranational metaphor, a sight whose greater sociopolitical value outweighs the generalized thematic underlining achieved by the accidental shooting of this English soldier. Moreover, the point is made with the *An Giall* ending that, in attempting to hold on to Leslie in order to be able to execute him in reprisal if the I.R.A. youth in Belfast is put to death, the I.R.A. men have inadvertently killed Leslie—and done so before his time, for the British boy was not to have died until the lad in Belfast did.<sup>3</sup> This robs the I.R.A. men of the satisfaction of murdering Leslie directly but, more important, it nicely stresses their ineptitude and even cowardliness—in telling contradistinction to media glorification of the Irish Republican Army, then as now.

The character Pat had hinted at the I.R.A. Officer's ineptitude, even cowardliness, earlier in the play:

PAT. You know, there are two sorts of gunman, the serious, religious-minded ones, like you, and the laughing boys.

I.R.A. OFFICER. Like you.

PAT. Yes, and in the time of the troubles it was always the laughing boys who were the most handy with a gun. (133)

Pat is referring in his lines not only to himself, but also to Michael Collins, the Commander-in-Chief of the Irish Free State Army until 1922, who was known as the "Laughing Boy."<sup>4</sup> Along with Arthur Griffith, Minister of Home Affairs and founder in 1905 of the Sinn Féin ("Ourselves Alone") Party, Collins negotiated the Treaty of 1921, by which Ireland became a self-governing dominion of the British Commonwealth and Northern Ireland continued its constitutional existence within the United Kingdom. Collins

knew when to put down his gun, but because of his compromise he was assassinated by a Republican—that is, by one of those serious, religious-minded gunmen like the I.R.A. Officer.

*The Hostage*, like Pat and Michael Collins, is a “laughing boy.” Its deadly seriousness stands out all the better, is more effective, for contrast with or relief by its spirited comedy, as Joan Littlewood clearly realized and as Behan himself came to see:

T. S. Eliot wasn’t far wrong when he said that the main problem of the dramatist today was to keep his audience amused; and that while they were laughing their heads off, you could be up to any bloody thing behind their backs; and it was what you were doing behind their bloody backs that made your play great. (*Island*, 17)

Also like Collins and Pat,<sup>5</sup> *The Hostage* favors compromise: it neither worships the I.R.A. nor vilifies the British. It legitimately criticizes both, only to lay down its verbal arms in the end and call for love and understanding between Ireland and England. This it does through Leslie’s coming to life and being joined in song by all the other characters. The fact that Leslie is dead one moment and alive the next is the culmination of the play’s intermingling of the tragic and the comic, is itself affectionate mockery of conventional dramatic form or conventional dramatic seriousness. Life and the comic spirit of exuberance and reconciliation are finally *made* to prevail in this drama. Again, the device of reviving a character was nothing new in 1958—it can be found as far back as the Greeks—but, like the play as a whole, it *works*. This is the greatest tribute one can pay to *The Hostage*, and a tribute that one could never offer from simply reading the play. It must be seen, in a good production. This is true of all plays, of course, but it is truer of Behan’s *The Hostage* than most.

## Notes

1. “Queer,” definitions 1a. and 2b., *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. C. Merriam, 1967).
2. Richard Wall writes, “In act one [of *An Giall*] Monsúr prevents Patrick from removing [the press], because it might be useful as ‘a kind of refuge . . . for anyone staying in the room’” (“*An Giall* and *The Hostage* Compared,” in Mikhail, 144).
3. The former I.R.A. soldier Pat is mistaken at the end of *The Hostage* when he responds to Teresa’s line, “But he’s [Leslie] dead,” with, “So is the boy in Belfast Jail” (182). The boy in Belfast Jail is *not* dead yet; he will not be

executed until 8 A.M. (92). This is important, because it means that Leslie died *before* he was supposed to, according to the rules of reprisal.

What time is it at the end of *The Hostage*? Teresa says that it is only 11 P.M. (177); Pat says that it is closer to 1 A.M. (177). Either way, it is not 8 A.M. or later—stage time is not *that* flexible—and Leslie has died before his time.

4. In Act I, Pat notes that Collins was called the “Laughing Boy” and sings a song in his memory (133). By contrast, Pat notes Teresa’s seriousness, also in Act I:

TERESA. I’m very happy here.

PAT. You’re welcome!

TERESA. And I hope you’ll be satisfied with my work.

PAT. I’ll be satisfied if you’ll do a bit more laughing and not be so serious.

TERESA. I’ve always been a serious girl. (114)

After this exchange, Teresa launches into a song commemorating her seriousness.

5. Pat still has some sympathy for the I.R.A. because he was once a Republican soldier, and because he lives in the same house with, and takes care of, Monsewer, under whom he served and who himself remains completely loyal to the cause. But Pat makes his true feelings known, his desire to live in peace and be done with the I.R.A., in lines like these:

This is nineteen-fifty-eight, and the days of the heroes is over this thirty-five years past. Long over, finished and done with. The I.R.A. and the War of Independence are . . . dead . . . It’s bad enough for [Monsewer] not to have a clock, but I declare to Jesus, I don’t think he even has a calendar. And who has all the trouble of it? I have. He wants the new I.R.A., so called, in this place now. “Prepare a room for them,” no less. (92)

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## 2. CHARACTER AND ROLE.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “What is the dramatic function of a particular character: why is this character in the play or plays in question, and what does he or she contribute to the development of the theme?”

### “Falstaff’s Dramatic Character”

#### Background

Shakespeare’s source for the *Henry IV* plays was English history as filtered through Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587). From there he shaped the material into a blend of moral-cum-political exemplum and Biblical parable. Shakespeare retained enough of the moral and political instruction in the *Chronicles* to encourage many critics to view the plays as essentially amplified presentations of a tale of personal as well as national penance and reform. But in the playwright’s hands Holinshed also became a marvelous and varied entertainment, a powerful drama of conflict between fathers and sons, and a profound exploration of the impact of the Renaissance on Elizabethan England—all of which serve, along with the individual or characterological conflicts, to raise the plays to mythic status.

Although there is no evidence that the cycle of plays including *Richard II* (1595), *Henry IV, Part One* (1596-97), and *Henry V* (1598-99) was intended by Shakespeare to form a unit, then, there is much continuity of theme as well as character in this group of works. As a whole, the cycle traces the historical transition from the reign of Richard II, a distinctly medieval king, to the reign of Henry V, a distinctly Renaissance king. And while it is an “unofficial” cycle, salient aspects of this royal transition are implied at the end of each play, projected into the next, then developed and explored. *Henry IV, Part*

*Two*, for instance, may be a sequel (although at the same time an independent play) to *Henry IV, Part One*, but to place it in its larger framework one must briefly look back to *Richard II*.

In *Richard II*, the legitimate king of the title is deposed by Bolingbroke, who becomes Henry IV. This act must be viewed as a regal usurpation as well as a necessary political expediency. It is a usurpation because the deposition is unjustifiable, indeed unthinkable, from the strictly medieval point of view represented by what has been called “the great chain of being” (see Lovejoy). This idea holds that the universe is ordered or hierarchical, that everything is given a place by God, and that one’s station in life must not be changed. In this world of feudal trust, governed by ritual, an anointed king is representative of God’s will. And to depose him is to call into question all order in the world. And, indeed, the effects of Henry Bolingbroke’s revolution initiated in England a new, less innocent world.

Since divine law, in the form of Richard II’s divine mandate, is ruptured when this king is deposed by Bolingbroke, the rebellions (predicted by Richard)—not to speak of the fear of assassination, sickness, and guilt—which follow in both parts of *Henry IV* can be seen as a natural consequence of the break in the venerable structure of authority. *Henry IV, Part One* presents the immediate political effects, the suspicion, distrust, and further betrayal of Henry’s nobility (the men who helped him steal the crown), together with the wider effects of the newfound sense of individualism on all facets of life. This play, in large measure, is concerned with the struggle of various individualistic viewpoints—each with its own *personal* sense of justice—to absorb the whole, to fill the vacuum left by the discredited absolute denoted by the term “great chain of being.”

The focus in *Henry IV, Part One* is on Prince Hal, later Henry V, and his attempt to reconcile or at least compromise the conflicting claims upon his person, as a Renaissance man and future king, of attitudes represented, on the one hand, by the glory-obsessed rebel Hotspur, and on the other by the humorous wastrel named Falstaff. The world of the tavern, though characterized by its riotous submission to basic appetites, still retains humor and irony. The battlefield, by contrast, represents nothing but reckless courage and the pursuit of personal honor at any cost. Hal senses the need for an alternative to this sure path to early death, and therefore he learns to balance the conflicting demands of rigidity and flexibility, discipline and license.

Hal’s progress, in other words, is between the two extremes of individualism characteristic of the Renaissance: the obsessive, bloody quest for glory in the person of Hotspur, and the pleasure seeking, nearly total incontinence of Falstaff. What Hal learns from each of them could be said

to be the sense of valor and honor of the one, juxtaposed against the wit and humanity of the other. But, in a way, this is so only “theoretically.” For the nature of the prince, as king, in *Henry V* is quite removed from either the thesis or the antithesis that precedes him. Thus the practical politician that the king, entering modernity, must become is an eclectic solution rather than a great synthesis.

If in *Henry IV, Part One*, Shakespeare showed the new world mainly as a burst of new energies, in *Henry IV, Part Two* he explores, one might say, some aspects of its darker side. The new freedom to express or develop individual potential is not without cost at the very heart of human dealings, any more that it had been on the superficial political level. This is a “fallen” world and hence a diminished one, too, in which the power of the individual had been both exaggerated and misconstrued. This is not to say, however, that we find the radical loss of moral certainty here that characterizes Shakespeare’s problem comedies such as *Measure for Measure* (1603-04) and *All’s Well That Ends Well* (1604-05). Still, the characters in these history plays become almost travesties of their former selves, or what those selves used to represent. Shakespeare, then, presents a society in triumph but also one of atrophied moral sensitivity, escaping always in bad faith.

Individualism, in the form of self-interest, rules at the start of *Henry V*, yet in an orderly, legalistic way. That is, *secular* law reigns, twisted to the new king’s aggressive purposes by divine, and divinely acquisitive, hands. And despite Henry’s invocation of the Lord at strategic moments in the drama—indeed, his pairing of God’s will with England’s destiny—it is secularism that wins the day at Agincourt and continues to do so during the troubled reign of Henry VI, “Whose state so many had the managing, / That they lost France, and made his England bleed” (Epilogue, lines 11-12; 1520). [The infant Henry VI succeeds his father, Henry V, who died only two years after his military triumph and marriage to Catherine of France.]

These deflating lines by the Chorus of *Henry V*, after discharging its role as a narrative bridge in confident tones, capture Shakespeare’s play in all its ambivalence: as a patriotic, even jingoistic paean to King and country, on the one hand, and an ironic, even bitter enunciation of moral and political disorder, on the other. That disorder pervades the three *Henry VI* dramas plus *Richard III*, in all of which England continues to suffer retribution for Henry Bolingbroke’s overthrow and murder of a rightful monarch, Richard II. In Shakespeare’s wishful, providential scheme, only with the restitution of the legitimate successor at the end of *Richard III*—Henry VII, the first Tudor King—can England enjoy peace and greatness once again. There is but temporary peace at the end of *Henry V*, and the king’s newfound greatness will be short-lived; he may have shed his lawless companions along with

his prodigality, reconciled with his father, and won glory on the French battlefield, but Henry's early death will prevent him from ever truly consolidating his gains in France.

In this cycle of history plays, in sum, Shakespeare presents a society in transition from the medieval view of the world as a "great chain of being," an utterly planned cosmos under the direction of one God, to the Renaissance and even modern view of the world as a collection of self-serving individuals under the rule of secular—and therefore mutable—law. Living in a period of transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Shakespeare looked back on the feudal system, with its sense of divine order in the universe and moral purpose in history, its land-based economy together with its static social order, institutions, and hierarchies, and its widely accepted values wedded to a body of knowledge expressed in Latin. But he also seemed to intuit the decay of that order and the shattering impact of Protestantism, empiricism, capitalism, nationalism, and New-World exploration, all of which gave birth to the modern world.

As an artist writing for an increasingly secular, urban audience, for a kind of theatre and acting company unknown to London before the 1590s, and in a language just beginning to rival Latin in subtlety and range, Shakespeare was a product of the new. His mind is an epitome of the dynamic questioning that produced Montaigne, Cervantes, Bacon, Galileo, and Machiavelli. At the same time, Shakespeare had strong allegiances to the old. A child of Stratford as well as of London, he saw that change was not always for the better, that some things being destroyed were precious and irreplaceable, and that the new forces being unleashed might bring the time, as Albany says in *King Lear* (1605-06), when "Humanity must perforce prey upon itself, / Like monsters of the deep" (IV.ii.50-51; 2530).

This double perspective permeates Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays. Falstaff, the landless knight, and Hotspur, who does battle on horseback even in his sleep, may represent the decline of chivalry; but the freedom, good humor, and affection of the fat sovereign of the tavern and the playfulness, biting wit, and idealism of Hotspur make them the most appealing characters. Set against them are strikingly familiar students of Machiavelli, the humorless, brutal, heartless users of other men: Worcester, Northumberland, Henry IV, Prince John, and eventually Hal himself. In Falstaff's unmasking of "grinning honour" (1 *Henry IV*, V.iii.57; 1217) and the trusting innocence of Hotspur, then, Shakespeare exposed fatal flaws in the feudal system. In the betrayals of friendship and kinship, the boundless opportunism and unprincipled manipulateness of the New Man—made comic in *Richard III* but terrifying in *Iago*, *Edmund*, and *Lear*'s two cannibalistic daughters—he gave us a prophetic vision of the bloody repressions and revolutions, the horrific world

warfare and genocide, the political assassination and human exploitation that constitute the modern history of relations between nations.

With passionate ambivalence Shakespeare shows us, in the tetralogy from *Richard II* to *Henry V*, war as a reflection of national pride, as a proving ground for men, and as a gloriously epic adventure. But he also shows us Falstaff milking money from draft dodgers and gathering the sick together with the poor for cannon fodder. He shows us the cynicism of the common soldier, war as an instance of mutual butchery, and warfare as a ploy for suppressing political rebellion. By revealing multifarious aspects of the action and by moving characters from one telling situation to another, Shakespeare forces us constantly to change perspective, to shift our sympathies, to reassess the cumulative meaning of his dramatic creation. The ultimate realist, he encloses us in a maze of emotions, ideas, and motivations—pride, fear, ignorance, ambition, love, duty, pragmatism, idealism—which bears little resemblance to the simplistic framework supplied by Raphael Holinshed.

### The Character of Falstaff

In the history plays, Falstaff is the central character at the London Eastcheap Tavern habituated by young Hal, Prince of Wales and later King Henry V, estranged from his father Henry IV. For the first half of *Henry IV, Part One*, Falstaff embodies tavern-world “holiday” (I.ii.182; 1164) influences, keeping Hal from helping his father’s side as Henry IV faces mounting threats—from rebel forces, particularly—in what has become the everyday world of civil war. Unknown to Falstaff, Hal in an early soliloquy marks his intention of rejecting the tavern crew; and he shows himself largely distinct from them at Gadshill, where Falstaff’s band robs a group of pilgrims. In partly comic charade, with Hal playing King Henry to Falstaff as Prince, Hal rejects Falstaff yet then protects him from a tavern search by the law.

The play subsequently traces Hal’s turn back toward his father as Falstaff raises troops for the impending, climactic Shrewsbury battle with the rebels. There Hal rescues his father’s life and in single combat kills his heroic rebel-rival Harry Hotspur, “king of honour” (1 *Henry IV*, IV.i.10; 1203) in the play. Hotspur’s heroic notions of honor are also dangerous, however, as Falstaff makes clear with a realistic if cowardly counter-assessment of their costs: “Can honour set-to a leg? No. Or an arm? No” (1 *Henry IV*, V.i.130-131; 1214). At the play’s end, he gains public credit for dispatching Hotspur because Hal is willing to “gild” a lie for Falstaff (V.iv.151; 1221), who knows full well that Hal is due the credit, since he, Falstaff, witnessed the fight while pretending to be dead.

*Henry IV, Part Two*, with its own near climactic battle against the rebels at Gaultree, repeats some of *Part One*’s dramatic structure. Falstaff is faced

down by Hal in the Act II, scene iv, tavern scenes of both plays; Hal is again far from his father in the opening acts and once more reconciles with Henry IV at the dying man's bedside in Act IV. And Falstaff is again rejected, now seriously, when Hal become King Henry V in Act V, scene v. The body of *Henry IV, Part Two*, however, shows Falstaff on his own apart from Hal, who is a reduced presence in this play, with only half the lines (9.5%) he had in *Part One* (19%); Falstaff retains his same 20%.

Falstaff is a man on the make in *Henry IV, Part Two*, thanks to his Shrewsbury-based soldierly reputation, which allows him to insult England's lord chief justice with impunity; to prey inventively on two rural justices, Shallow and Silence, as he again recruits troops; to lust after the prostitute Doll Tearsheet, who marks the transformation of the Boar's Head Tavern into a brothel; and to capture a Gaultree rebel, who gives up on the strength of Falstaff's fame alone. In public, he speaks for youth and modern fashion, yet privately he worries over age and failing health, admits to Doll that he is old, and arrives not only late but also improperly dressed for Hal's coronation: "O, if I had had time to have made new liveries" (2 *Henry IV*, V.v.10; 1373). Age is his downfall, as the new king's disavowal of Falstaff finds him, together with his former influence, out of date literally and symbolically: "I know thee not, old man" (V.v.45; 1374).

The *Henry IV* plays have several overlapping themes and patterns. There is a conflict between the generations pitting young, virile Hal and Hotspur against sick, past-ridden, crafty, impotent, guilty old men—a conflict parodied by Falstaff as he descends on the travelers in the Gadshill robbery with the cry "They hate us youth" (1 *Henry IV*, II.ii.76; 1175). Each of the fathers, moreover, has a characteristic way of trying to control Hal. Motionless, Henry IV lets the freezing rigidity of his distant majesty break Hal down, whereas Falstaff is constantly moving and shouting at Hal, cajoling and approaching him. There are the equally universal conflicts in these two plays of holiday versus everyday; the individual's need for joy, fluidity, and release against society's need for order, duty and restraint; as well as the desire for power and immortality set against the limitations placed on man by the force of nature.

In the clash of Falstaff and his world with Henry IV and his, we see the former, a man "out of all compass" (1 *Henry IV*, III.iii.17; 1199) in body and spirit—night reveler, punster, protean role-player, court jester, rebel against all limits, an embodiment in short of the comic spirit—come up against everything in life that demands to be taken seriously. Incorporating the Falstaff-theme is the pattern of death and rebirth. Falstaff is a sacrificial figure, heaped with the sins of both his community and the wayward prince, then banished like the human as well as animal victims in Frazer's *Golden*



*Bough* (1922). For his part Henry IV, having killed Richard the King, suffers and dies (like Oedipus) to rid his kingdom of the plague, to be replaced by the son he feared might kill him. Only thus does spring replace winter and are the curses of disease and sterility removed.

*Henry V* bars Falstaff from the stage, but sympathetic reports of his death darken the portrait of heroically—or jingoistically—military Henry V. The new king never asks after his old companion, never even utters Falstaff's name. Henry's retinue, however, reminds the audience (though not Henry) of his rejection of Falstaff, a reminder that contributes to Hal's loss of humanity as king. That loss is connected to the loss of the absolute distinction between high and low that occurs when Falstaff is banished at the end of *Henry IV, Part Two*, in deference to a legalistic conception of social order. Hal, Henry V, thus represents a firm step on the path that will lead, as a character in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830) laments, to a time when there will be no more kings in Europe—only prime ministers and presidents.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1598-99), purportedly fulfilling Queen Elizabeth I's wish to see Falstaff in love, presents a far less resourceful Sir John, one humiliated throughout the play. Impelled by his amorous sense of self and the unreasonably jealous husband Master Ford, Falstaff is duped perpetually both by members of his tavern crew from the histories, who turn upon him as a "varlet vile" (*Merry Wives*, I.iii.84; 1242), and by the faithful Windsor wives Mistresses Ford and Page, upon whom his desire falls. He barely escapes discovery with Mistress Ford twice, once carried away crammed into a wash-basket filled with dirty laundry and thrown into the river Thames, then exiting dressed as an old woman whom Ford cudgels. By the play's end Falstaff is tricked into standing in a forest wearing dear antlers and waiting for yet another assignation, frightened by (play-acting) fairies before he is revealed—"Fie on lust and luxury!" (V.v.91; 1287)—to everyone. Falstaff's final "Use me as you will" both acknowledges conclusive defeat and summarizes his humiliations throughout the play (V.v.153; 1288).

Aging and heirless Elizabeth may have wished to see Falstaff in love, but the late-sixteenth century vogue for onstage histories was probably dictated by the political uncertainty in England during the 1580s and 1590s, when the nation saw no obvious successor to this late representative of the Tudor line. Chief among these histories were plays like *Henry IV, Part One* and *Henry IV, Part Two*, detailing the last era of civil turmoil, the fifteenth-century War of the Roses, which suggested a possibly hopeful pattern surfacing from unrest. That war's vexed succession to the English Crown involved foreign and domestic conflict, but from it finally emerged the strong Tudor line of monarchs, liberally assisted by providence—at least in Tudor propagandistic accounts of the war.

*Henry IV, Part One* partly stems from a source steeped in providential design—the Prodigal Son story, the most common of earlier morality interludes and plays. Rejecting Falstaff as “that reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity . . . that Vanity in Years” (II.v.413-414; 1187), Hal briefly addresses him in the language usually leveled at Vice in moral drama, after Falstaff himself has threatened Hal with Vice’s usual stage prop, the “dagger of lath” (II.v.124; 1181). The Prodigal Son pattern perhaps derives from an earlier, anonymous dramatic version of Hal’s story, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1580s), which lacks a separate Vice figure. If so, Falstaff as Vice in the *Henry IV* plays is new, the old play locating a vice in young Hal, who later undergoes a St. Paul-like transformation. Shakespeare shifts culpability to Falstaff and his tavern crew, who thus become convenient scapegoats for Hal’s behavior.

Yet Falstaff fails to meet Vice’s job description fully. In *Henry IV, Part One* he enters dramatic literature not scheming to corrupt Hal, but fast asleep; in *Part Two* he is hardly around Hal enough to win his spleen, let alone his soul—the two being together in two scenes for 132 lines, 4% of the play, contrasted to more than 1,000 lines over the course of eight scenes in *Part One*, almost a third of the play. The aging Falstaff of *Henry IV, Part Two* appears to represent, then, not Vice from morality models but the figure of “Old Morality,” a man on his way out despite his arguments for modernization.

Other background information may help to explain Falstaff’s departures from simple moral Vice in *Henry IV, Part One* and *Part Two*. Renaissance political theory suggests that Hal is a young prince confronted with models of political virtue and their opposite: Falstaff is a type of dishonorable action set against Hotspur’s notion of honor in *Henry IV, Part One*; and in *Part Two* he contrasts with the lord chief justice, an embodiment of legal order. For some, however, Falstaff is more important to Hal’s education as prince, for Falstaff is not just a contrast to Hotspur but a corrective to his excessive pursuit of honor. Others find Falstaff to be the stage stereotype of distorted honor, displaying features of the braggart soldier derived from *miles gloriosus* of ancient Roman comedy. Falstaff may even link up with medieval philosophy and linguistics on the subject of honor, for he appears to be tied to nominalism—the denying of meaning to abstract words—as he reduces “honour” to the element producing its sounds in *Henry IV, Part One*: “What is honour? A word. What is in that word ‘honour’? What is that ‘honour’? Air” (V.i.133-134; 1214).

Biblical tradition could also figure here. There are those who see the plays *Richard II* to *Henry V* as an analogue to post-Babel linguistic collapse, and Falstaff’s nominalism as a logical degenerative stage following on King



Richard's earlier worry over adequate nomenclature once a rightful (pre-Edenic) king is deposed. For others, like James L. Calderwood, Falstaff is simply lying's "human form" (68). Religious tradition figures more convincingly in considerations of folk celebrations of Lent, with their ritualistic if reluctant exile of the holiday impulse in expelling celebratory Carnival. The Carnival pageant is always corpulent, as is "fat-kidneyed" (1 *Henry IV*, II.ii.6; 1173) and "fat-guts" (II.ii.29; 1174) Falstaff. Religious tradition even allies with clown theory if Falstaff is regarded as a Christian fool, the spirit of play amid a world of utilitarianism, whose veiled and often scriptural comments reveal Henry IV as thief of the crown, honor as a hollow value, and Hal's claims of repentance as a sham.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* barely mentions Falstaff in the company of prince, king, or court, emphasizing domestic—not political—virtue and vice. The political realities of Elizabethan society, however, provide a telling if ambiguous framework for the play. Sixteenth-century patriarchal values dominate *Merry Wives* for feminist critics, who highlight the wives' obsession with demonstrating what their husbands want: chastity. But the women could be said to control the men in this comedy, thereby disrupting male dominance. Successful feminine plotting parallels queen-dominated court politics, which arouses male uneasiness—uneasiness most obviously embodied in Falstaff's onstage humiliation and lengthy, rueful reflections on being "cozened, and beaten too" (IV.v.77; 1281). England's rigid class structure may also be invoked here, with the middle class besting a corrupt aristocracy in Falstaff, the titled knight.

Stage tradition, again, could partly account for the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, given the braggart soldier's conventional pretensions as a lover—especially as we find him incarnated in the *capitano* figure of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Sexual proclivities, however, appear as well in the likely source of *Merry Wives*, Giovanni Fiorentino's novella *Il pecorone* (*The Simpleton*, 1378), whose oversexed student is a Falstaff prototype. Elizabethan folk practices may also be important to this comedy if one sees Falstaff as a domestic scapegoat, a threatening spirit of fertility symbolically castrated at the end of the play.

## Falstaff on Stage

Over the course of four hundred years, audiences have seen a range of Falstaffs, including seventeenth-century counter-textual, svelte portrayals and beardless twentieth-century ones. The twentieth century's versions have been majestic but perhaps too jovial and nice, or, antithetically, they have been belligerent, with Ralph Richardson (1945) giving Falstaff a grief as well as a magnanimity, Hugh Griffith (1964) making him a Rabelaisian, gray-

bearded Mephistopheles, Orson Welles (1966) on film showing him to be a manipulated man, and Anthony Quayle (1979) on BBC videotape indicating Falstaff's canny intelligence. Yet there is perhaps too simple a dualism in these twentieth-century renderings, one Falstaff being a boisterous merry-maker, the other a more complex and endearing, but never quite convincing, façade. This disjunction probably began in eighteenth-century portraits, where Edward Berry's beerhouse Falstaff opposed James Quin's judicious one.

Twentieth-century portrayals also often sacrifice some of the fun-loving Falstaff of *Henry IV, Part One* to the diseased version of *Part Two*. Academic criticism's usual moral view of Falstaff as Hal's misleader here takes the stage, in a production emphasis on the history plays as a cycle. *Henry IV, Part One* requires a Falstaff who clearly manifests qualities Hal rejects in *Part Two*, seen by the same audience sometimes the next day. Quayle, for instance, in an early appearance as Falstaff (1951), unsuccessfully protested the loss of comedic moments, and by 1979 he had become a Falstaff obviously dangerous to Hal. There is a related bias against broad comedy from Falstaff: stage critics saw childishness in the gags and outlandish costume of John Woodvine's clown-like 1986 portrait. Nonetheless, Shakespeare very likely created Falstaff's role for a clown—a sensible notion even for those holding to the view that Falstaff simply is Vice, since the clown's ancestry in the Tudor Vice is a generally accepted fact of theater history.

The presence of Richard Tarlton, a clown well remembered even after his death in 1588, hovers around if not always in Shakespeare's text; Falstaff's use of a theological reformer's language in fact echoes one of Tarlton's routines. It is a significant echo, given Tarlton's appearance in Shakespeare's source play, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, perhaps as the religious martyr Sir John Oldcastle, Falstaff's likely original name in *Henry IV, Part One*. Conjecturally, the burlesqued Oldcastle offended his descendants and prompted a name change, with the new name coming from cowardly Sir John Fastolf of Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part One* (1591-92).

A less spectral presence is Will Kempe, the clown of Shakespeare's company through 1599. Editors barely acknowledge the presence of Kempe (preferring instead to favor the presence of Pope or Lowin in the role), but Falstaff could have been a role written for him, one in which his trademarks are obvious and congruent with themes in all three Falstaff plays. Kempe's established persona as a plain man of the lower classes perpetually contrasted with Falstaff's knightly title—and thus became a comic reflection of a king who, as usurper, is also not a proper king. Kempe's costume in *Henry IV, Part Two* was out of place, since he employed an underclass cap and an out-of-date doublet, which could be taken as clown commentary on aspirations to fashion—including, perhaps, Hal's father masquerading as a king. Kempe's

prop weapon was actually an apprentice's wooden sword, a literal "false staff," fit for an underclass clown and also a visual reminder that soldierly Falstaff parodies soldiers. Kempe's seemingly ad-libbed verbal dexterity, moreover, underscored a Falstaff constantly searching out the right face-saving line yet consistently debasing language, so that his nominalism is no surprise. Kempe, like other clowns, cultivated an image of sexual potency combined with the thwarting of his satisfaction onstage, which accords with the lecherous-but-denied Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Kempe's position as a clown leads to a different sense of Henry V's rejection of Falstaff, an act over which some modern commentators wring their hands and hearts. It is the clown Kempe whom the first audience saw every bit as much as the character of Falstaff, just as modern audiences at once see a Jerry-Lewis style performance and the character of the Devil (played by Ray Walston) in *Damn Yankees* (1958). And their expectations of a clown colored that first audience's perception of the plays. Some in the audience knew how the clown as Vice—or Carnival—must finish; most knew that, rejected or not as character, the clown would be back—as he may be in *Henry IV, Part Two* almost immediately.

One can further speculate that Kempe delivered that play's epilogue, in which its speaker dances, for dance was a Kempe specialty. This was the conventional ending for the clown, his part always a progress toward the jig, a moment of release for the spectators, who joined in verbally and in other ways during the enactment of misrule that was the jig. *Henry IV, Part Two* ends, then, with the anarchy expected from a clown, balancing and even calling into question King Henry V's stuffy rejection of misrule from Falstaff, whom he calls "The tutor and the feeder of my riots" (2 *Henry IV*, V.v.60; 1374). The first audience may have lost Falstaff, but it still had Will Kempe. By extension, a coming generation might see a Falstaff enacted not by a skilled legitimate actor, a Richardson, Welles, or Quayle, but instead by a modern clown comparable to a Jackie Gleason or a Benny Hill—say, Bill Irwin or even Kevin Kline.

## Critical Reception

Within a short time of Falstaff's first stage appearance, his dialogue was already common linguistic currency enough to appear in a 1598 stage document, one index of the instantaneous immortality some scholars have seen the public according to him. Falstaff is featured with Hotspur on all surviving title pages, as Prince Hal was not; Falstaff is also featured prominently on the title pages of the quarto-format text of *Henry IV, Part Two* and two quartos of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. When other Elizabethan dramas later became unprofitable to revive, Falstaff's presence alone made *Henry IV, Part*

*One* worth staging; a Falstaff skit is recorded even during the Puritan closing of English theaters from 1642 to 1660. A brief early nineteenth-century absence aside, *Part One* has held the stage fairly consistently until now; Thomas Betterton's Falstaff was a hit of the 1699-1700 season, while Ralph Richardson's was similarly effective nearly a quarter of a millennium later.

The other Falstaff plays, however, lagged behind in acceptance. *Henry IV, Part Two* disappeared from the stage for a century, to be brought back in the early 1700s perhaps only because of Falstaff's popularity in *Part One*. Despite more favor from the mid-nineteenth century on, *Part Two* has since rarely been staged without an accompanying *Henry IV, Part One*. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has done far better, at least since the later seventeenth century, and has served as the libretto for at least five operas (to mention only the better known ones), from Antonio Salieri's to the one by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1796, 1799, 1838, 1849, 1929).

Commentators took to Falstaff enthusiastically, at least as early as John Dryden in 1668. A century and a half of early criticism is largely subsumed in A. C. Bradley's early twentieth-century rejection of the Falstaff of *Merry Wives* as not "the real" one (78) because he is so humiliated, while the audiences of the histories are unable to condemn a Falstaff who, according to Bradley, is so extraordinary a being that our hearts go with him; this sentiment implicitly acknowledges both nineteenth-century romantic interpretations like William Hazlitt's, celebrating Falstaff's freedom from restraint, and eighteenth-century appreciations like Maurice Morgann's, who cannot "conceive Shakespeare ever meant to make cowardice an essential part of [Falstaff's] constitution" (15). Even Samuel Johnson in 1765 partly exculpates Falstaff, though seeing clearly enough that he is "loaded with faults" (8).

Mid-twentieth-century commentary found an eminently rejectable Falstaff as it placed him within theatrical, literary, and other traditions. E. E. Stoll emphasizes the clown practices of roaring and falling flat in establishing why Falstaff may be seen as coward; other censoring approaches came from John Dover Wilson (acknowledging his debt to Johnson), E. M. W. Tillyard, and C. L. Barber. Later commentators on the histories, like Sherman Hawkins and Roy Battenhouse, have partly reacted against such strictures. Sigurd Burckhardt, for her part, replaces Tillyard's Falstaff-as-defeated dishonor with a Sir John who is "the reality principle incarnate" (293) when he rises at Shrewsbury, while R. R. Macdonald sees Falstaff's language not as degenerative nominalism or simple lying but as necessary progress over outdated linguistic practices of the past. The Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has been spared a similar evolution because, as T. W. Craik argues in his 1990 edition of the play, Falstaff's credentials as sacrificial scapegoat in *The Merry Wives* as far less convincing than in the histories, and so no

extensive framework ever revolved around him for current commentary now to begin disassembling.

### Continuing Influence

Before, after, and in between the high points of Giuseppe Verdi's opera titled *Falstaff* (1893), Fernand Crommelynck's play called *The Knight of the Moon* (1954), Orson Welles's play *Five Kings* (1938, 1960), and Welles's film *Chimes at Midnight* (a.k.a. *Falstaff*, 1966), the fortunes of Falstaff have percolated at their own rhythm. His continuing influence was evidenced by Gus van Sant's 1991 movie *My Own Private Idaho*, which grafts a contemporary gay storyline onto the framework of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*. But, Shakespeare's drama excluded, Falstaff's legacy goes as far back as the seventeenth century, and can be found in later plays by Samuel Johnson himself (1739) and James Branch Cabell (1906), among numerous others, as well as in novels by Robert Nye (1976) and Jack-Alain Léger (1996), not to speak of a nineteenth-century poem on the Falstaff-theme by Herman Melville.

Among the lesser lesser-known but nonetheless representative plays that center around the character of Sir John, one can discover a 1766 work by the Englishman William Kenrick (1725-79) titled *Falstaff's Wedding: A Comedy*, which was meant as a sequel to *Henry IV, Part Two* in imitation of Shakespeare; a "drollery" called *The Bouncing Knight*, by Francis Kirkman (1632-80), from his Restoration-era collection of twenty-one such drolls called *The Wits, or Sport upon Sport* (1662); *The Death of Falstaff* (1820), a melodrama by the Briton Zachariah Jackson (who in 1818 also wrote a book called *Shakespeare's Genius Justified: A few concise examples of seven hundred errors in Shakespeare's plays, now corrected and elucidated*); and *The Life and Humours of Falstaff* (1829), a comedy by Charles Short formed out of both parts of *Henry IV* and several scenes from *Henry V*.

All the variations on the Falstaff-theme—be they dramatic, novelistic, cinematic, operatic, or poetic—stem in the end from an unflagging Bardolatry and are representative of what is almost a subgenre in itself: Shakespeare imitations. In their own way, they attest to the immense vitality that, over the centuries, has continued to inhabit the rotund figure of a Falstaff who is never out of place in any time. As Dover Wilson aptly put it, Falstaff "is a figure we find in the looking-glass . . . no doubt, but still what it shows us is ourselves. Ourselves, not as we are, but as we can fancy we might have been; expanded, exalted in every direction of bodily life" (9). Falstaff's exalted quality is such that his rivals in Shakespeare are not many: Hamlet, Rosalind, and Cleopatra would complete the list unless we admit the intellectual villains, Iago and Edmund. All six of these have the rhetorical genius to overcome

any disputant. Yet Falstaff stands apart from the others because he is older than all of them, and younger than all of them, younger and older even than Cleopatra, who ends in absolute transcendence, whereas Falstaff ends in rejection and grief. For, despite his great wit, he violated the Freudian admonition not to invest too much affection in any one person.

Falstaff's tragedy, then, is one of misplaced love, but Shakespeare does not allow that to be our final sense of his grandest comic creation. Instead, we are given the great vision of the death of Falstaff in *Henry V*, which assures us that he is in Abraham's bosom, in heaven. Playing with flowers, and smiling upon his finger's end, Sir John dies like a child just christened, reminding us again of his total lack of hypocrisy, of what after all makes us love him, of what doubtless first drew the Machiavellian Hal to him. Authentic freedom—freedom from the superego, if you will—is the liberty to play, even as a child plays, in the very act of dying. Falstaff had that freedom, used it abundantly, then quietly departed the scene. His character survives him.

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## “The Delay of Polonius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”

In a play built on Hamlet’s hesitation or delay, it should come as no surprise that Polonius’s own long-winded delays find a home. What is a surprise, however, is the fact that the nature of his delay, as well as its relationship to Hamlet’s own, has escaped analysis in the criticism thus far published on Polonius’s character.

Polonius hesitates or delays immediately upon entering the play for the first time. Laertes is set to sail for Paris and is about to take his leave from Ophelia when Polonius enters (appropriately, on Laertes’ line “I stay too long”) and says, at I.iii.55-59:

Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame!  
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,  
And you are stayed for. There—my blessing with thee,  
And these few precepts in thy memory  
See thou character. (1680)

We expect Polonius to let Laertes go after he gives him his blessing, but father then goes on to give son, in more than twenty lines, the commandments of social living. The whole Polonius-Laertes-Ophelia subplot in *Hamlet*, introduced here for the first time in the play, itself could be looked at as a kind of delaying action—a “pause”—coming as it does right after Hamlet agrees to meet with Horatio and Marcellus on the guard-platform at night to see the Ghost, and preparing us subliminally for the larger delay on Hamlet’s part that we are to witness throughout the action.

Polonius’s next delay occurs in Act II, scene i. Even as he gave Laertes his blessing and then detained him with the “precepts,” so too does Polonius now give his servant Reynaldo “money and notes” to take to Laertes in Paris and then detain *him*, not only by asking Reynaldo to check on his son’s behavior, but also by giving him at length the proper strategy for doing so. We might expect the whole exchange of dialogue between Polonius and Reynaldo to go something like this:

POLONIUS. Give him this money and these notes, Reynaldo.  
REYNALDO. I will, my lord.  
POLONIUS. God buy ye, fare ye well.  
REYNALDO. Good my lord.

Instead we do not get Polonius’s “Fare ye well” (II.i.69; 1690) until sixty-seven lines after Reynaldo’s “I will, my lord” (II.i.2; 1688). And Reynaldo’s “Good my lord” is still not the end of it. Polonius then goes on to tell him to be



sure to observe Laertes directly as well as to make inquiries about his son to others. In his long-windedness, Polonius seems to have forgotten Reynaldo's original purpose in going to Paris: to give Laertes money and notes, during which time he would surely have the opportunity to observe Laertes directly in *facing* him directly. Finally, Polonius says "fare ye well" and Reynaldo departs. His brevity here is somewhat unexpected after the verbosity that has preceded it—it is also somewhat peremptory—and it is therefore comical.

Moreover, contributing to his delay, Polonius even forgets at one point the instructions he meant to give to Reynaldo:

REYNALDO: Very good, my lord.

POLONIUS: And then, sir, a does this—a does—what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something. Where did I leave?

REYNALDO: At "closes in the consequence," at "friend, or so," and "gentleman."

POLONIUS: At "closes in the consequence"—ay, marry . . . (II.i.48-54; 1689)

Any number of actors playing Polonius—Michael Redgrave, Ian Holm, and Hume Cronyn, to name only three from the twentieth century—have extended the delay at this point by pausing for a seeming eternity as he loses his place at II.i.50-51, with the lines "what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something. Where did I leave?" (1689).

Even as he has delayed throughout this meeting with his servant, Polonius counsels Reynaldo to "delay" in seeking information about Laertes. Instead of going to Laertes himself and confronting him, Reynaldo is to attempt, in addition to "observing" Polonius's son, to get information about him from his friends and acquaintances through deception. He is, as Polonius advises him at II.i.62, from "[his] bait of falsehood [to] take [a] carp of truth" (1689); Reynaldo is to "go fishing," in other words, and the metaphor itself suggests idleness, wait, or delay. Even as Polonius will later spy on Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia, and then spy on him as he speaks with Gertrude in the closet scene of Act III, scene iv, so too does Polonius counsel Reynaldo here to spy on Laertes.

This servant never reports back to his master about Laertes, however, and hence there is the faint suggestion that he was as long in making his inquiry into the behavior of Polonius's son as Polonius himself was in ordering Reynaldo to make such an inquiry in the first place. In any event, Polonius's and Reynaldo's secrecy here seems to be contagious, for Laertes returns, in Claudius's words at IV.v.84, "in secret" (1731) from France to avenge his father's murder. Unlike his father (and Hamlet), however, Laertes

is no delayer. No sooner have we been told by Claudius that he has come in secret from France than do we hear Laertes approaching the castle at line 92 (1732), see him break in at line 107 (1732), and see him confront the King at line 112 (1732).

Each time, after his delay with Laertes and after his delay with Reynaldo, Polonius is left to confront Ophelia. In the first case, it is as if she is the victim of her father's delay: for while he speaks the "precepts" to Laertes, Ophelia must stand idly by. Later in the play Ophelia is the real, if inadvertent, victim of Polonius's delay. He delays in spying on Gertrude and Hamlet—more on this later—and his delay leads to his own murder; his death then plays a large part in driving Ophelia mad, and in her madness she drowns. In the case of Polonius's delay with Reynaldo, Ophelia is the product or offspring of her father's delay: he delays and when he is finished, he stands face to face with his daughter, who has just entered. His delay, so to speak, creates her.

Subsequently in *Hamlet*, Ophelia appears to be the genuine product or offspring of Polonius's delay. After Hamlet kills Polonius in Act III, scene iv, we do not hear from Ophelia until Act IV, scene v, when she enters at line 20 "distracted, playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing" (1730). She has delayed her re-entrance to the play for five scenes, and when she does re-enter, she is mad, with her mind in what could be said to be a state of delay. Oblivious in her madness to her plight, Ophelia "delays" when she falls into the pond, whereupon the water gradually swallows her up. Polonius the delayer has thus spawned a kind of delayer in his own daughter.

Perhaps Polonius's most obvious delay comes in Act II, scene ii, when he goes expressly to tell Claudius what he believes to be the cause or origin of what Hamlet has termed, at I.v.173, his "antic disposition" (1688): Hamlet's unrequited love for Ophelia. Instead of immediately telling the king what he knows, or thinks he knows, Polonius defers to Voltemand and Cornelius, the ambassadors to Norway, who bring the news that young Fortinbras (under orders from old Norway) will not take up arms against Denmark. Then, after the ambassadors have spoken and departed, Polonius delays further. He does not come right out and state, at II.ii.49, what he believes to be "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (1692), but instead characterizes Hamlet as mad—something already more or less known by Claudius and Gertrude—reads a love letter from Hamlet to Ophelia, then finally connects the letter with Ophelia's negative response to Hamlet's love (a response ordered by Polonius himself) and explains Hamlet's madness as the result of his daughter's rebuffs.

All of this is punctuated by Polonius's own ironic "brevity is the soul of wit" (II.ii.91; 1693), Gertrude's "More matter with less art" (II.ii.96; 1693), and Claudius's "But how hath she / Received his love?" (II.ii.128-129; 1694)—the

direct answer to which would explain at once the cause of Hamlet's madness from Polonius's point of view. Claudius and Gertrude wait on Polonius, Polonius even waits on himself, as he delays, hesitating to say what he has come to say. One of the reasons Shakespeare did not have Ophelia accompany Polonius in this scene—and she was to have accompanied him [her father says to her, "Come, go we to the King," at the end of Act II, scene i on line 118 (1691)]—is that she would have prevented his delay, and Polonius's delay is as important to Shakespeare here as Polonius's theory about Hamlet's madness. Ophelia's mere presence, together with Claudius and Gertrude's understandable desire to hear what she has to say, would have made Polonius speak more to the point. The dramatist instead gives Polonius a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia to "speak" for Ophelia, so that she can be dropped out of the scene altogether and Polonius's delay got on with.

Polonius's penultimate delay also occurs in Act II, scene ii. He has suggested to Claudius, at II.ii.165-166, that they spy on Hamlet and Ophelia in the "lobby" in order to discover "If [Hamlet] love[s] her not, / And be not from his reason fall'n thereon" (1694); and Claudius has agreed to this. Then Hamlet enters the "lobby" where Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude are standing, but, instead of "loosing" Ophelia to him and seeking cover behind an arras with the King so as to "mark the encounter" (1694), as Polonius has just said he would do, he asks Claudius and Gertrude to leave so that he himself may immediately "board" Hamlet. Polonius thus delays. We expect him to act on his original plan, but he does not do so: first he wants to sound Hamlet out himself. Ironically, in abandoning the arras for a direct confrontation with Hamlet, Polonius will himself be "marked" by Hamlet from behind another kind of arras—Hamlet's madness, the very madness that Polonius thinks is real and transparent.

Polonius is no match for Hamlet, naturally, and he therefore, at II.ii.209-210, he falls back on the plan he and Claudius had agreed upon: "[Aside] . . . I will leave [Hamlet], and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter" (1696). He cannot do this immediately, however, for Claudius has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accomplish what Polonius has not been able to accomplish on his own. His plan must wait, or will be delayed, until Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves fail, in Claudius's own words at III.i.1-4, by "gift of circumstance / [to] Get from [Hamlet] why he puts on this confusion, / Grating so harshly all his days of quiet / With turbulent and dangerous lunacy" (1704).

Polonius's final delay of the play occurs, or is prepared for, in Act III, scene i, when, after he and Claudius have secretly observed Hamlet and Ophelia in conversation, Polonius suggests that, following the play-within-the-play, he be allowed to observe Gertrude and Hamlet in conversation.

Such observation can be construed as a kind of delay on Polonius's part because Claudius has already decided, at III.i.168, to send Hamlet "with speed" (1707) to England, on which journey

Haply the seas and countries different,  
With variable objects, shall expel  
This something-settled matter in his heart,  
Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus  
From fashion of himself. (III.i.170-174; 1708)

Once embarked, Hamlet will cease to worry Polonius with his attentions toward Ophelia, and, whether it is Hamlet's love for Ophelia that is the cause of his "lunacy" (Claudius does not believe this from his own observation of the two of them), the trip will presumably go a long way toward dispelling that lunacy. So there is no compelling reason for Polonius to want to spy on Hamlet again, except one: to prove what he strongly believes at III.i.176-177, that "The origin and commencement of [Hamlet's] grief / Sprung from neglected love" (1708). For untimely his delay in this instance, Polonius will be stabbed to death, through the arras, by Hamlet in the Queen's private chamber (or "closet") in Act III, scene iv.

Polonius's delay in *Hamlet* derives from his need to please or impress Claudius (Polonius rhetorically asks in Act II, scene ii, at lines 154-156, "Hath there been such a time—I'd fain know that— / That I have positively said, 'Tis so' / When it proved otherwise?" [1694]), as well as from his need to assert his parental prerogatives before Laertes. Polonius's delay is thus formally comic, because it is designed to accommodate or reconcile him to his society. When he hesitates so long to tell Claudius and Gertrude what he thinks is causing Hamlet's madness, it is not to anger or alienate the King and Queen, but to tease or titillate them with the "facts" (in addition to savoring his own "discovery") that he believes they want so much to hear. When Polonius accosts Hamlet alone in the "lobby," it is to examine Hamlet by himself and, as he himself declares at II.ii.158-160, to "find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the centre" (1694)—and thus to prove once again his value to the King as an "assistant to the state." And when he asks Claudius to let him spy on Gertrude and Hamlet, it is because he wants so very much to prove once again his value to the king as an "assistant for a state" (1695), as he describes his role at II.ii.167.

In addition, when Polonius gives Laertes "precepts" to follow in Paris, then later orders Reynaldo to discover the degree of his son's adherence to these precepts, it is to flatter himself with his paternal authority, as well as to make sure that Laertes does not do anything to endanger his status or the status of his family in Danish society. (Polonius does something similar in

advising Ophelia in Act II, scene ii, at line 141, not to see Hamlet, who, he says, is “a prince out of thy star” [1694].) Polonius is a meddlesome, bustling figure, then, the comic father who betrays that he is a character in a tragedy by his overwhelming, if unconscious, desire, not simply to accommodate himself to his society, but to promote or aggrandize himself at this society’s expense—in the person of Hamlet and even his own children.

If Polonius’s delay is comic, Hamlet’s, of course, is tragic. Or rather, as Fredson Bowers once said, it is not Hamlet’s delay that is tragic, “except for its effect upon his cumulative impatience, but his attempt at action” (747, note). Bowers’ point is that Hamlet delays in the play (up to the slaying of Polonius) “as minister waiting on the expected opportunity [to kill Claudius] which should be provided him [by God], and not finding it” (745). Hamlet as “minister” will perform an act of divine retribution in killing Claudius for his murder of old Hamlet, and thus will be kept free of crime; his murder of Claudius will be an act of public justice (as indeed it is at the close of the play). But when Hamlet kills Polonius in the closet scene, he becomes a “scourge” for anticipating by his deed the opportunity to kill Claudius that was designed by Heaven for the future. His quickly stabbing Polonius after mistaking him for Claudius is an act of private criminal revenge, and thus of a scourge. “Hamlet’s emotional drive is too strong to permit him to wait upon what appears to him to be Heaven’s extraordinary delay” (747, note), explains Bowers, and for his tragic murder of Polonius he must be punished according to the laws of God.

Unlike Polonius’s delay, Hamlet’s is designed to separate or distance him from society: in his soliloquies, so that he might examine his thoughts, motives, and doubts as well as his opportunities to act (such as when he comes upon Claudius praying in Act III, scene iii); in his “antic disposition” (I.v.173; 1688), so that through the mask of madness he might examine the thoughts, motives, and potential plans of others. Hamlet delays, not to aggrandize himself like Polonius, but to sacrifice self to other, to suppress his desire for “private criminal revenge” and wait for the moment provided by God to act. He wishes, in other words, to be an agent or minister of God rather than an aggrandizer or indulger of self. Hamlet is a private, reflective figure, then, a tragic hero whose only bow to the formally comic is his desire to see Danish society whole and healthy, happy and reconciled, once again.

Critics generally agree by now that Hamlet’s murder of Polonius is the turning point of the play: it re-introduces Laertes to the plot as Polonius’s avenger; Claudius employs Laertes as a tool to kill Hamlet in the climactic duel; and Hamlet slays Laertes as well as Claudius, then is himself slain. But Hamlet’s murder of Polonius is more than the turning point of the drama: it is also the destruction of the “comic delayer”—in this case, the man who

delays for all the wrong reasons—by the “tragic delayer”—in this case, the man who delays for all the right reasons—and thus it is a kind of ending or conclusion in itself. Ironically, it is Hamlet who is no longer delaying and who is making a mistake in no longer doing so, when he kills Polonius; and it is Polonius who is no longer delaying and who is doing the right thing in no longer doing so, when he calls for help for the queen he believes to be in distress.

In killing Polonius, Hamlet becomes like Polonius: an aggrandizer of self, because he anticipates Heaven in murdering the man he believes to be Claudius, because he takes divine justice into his own hands. In being slain by Hamlet, Polonius becomes quite unlike the Polonius we have known up to now. In calling for help for Gertrude he is still acting in part to protect his position in Danish society as an “assistant for a state,” but he is also obviously acting on his society’s behalf to protect the queen. Moreover, Polonius is acting impulsively now, not delaying, and ironically his action gets him killed at once. He is too late in his impulsiveness, it could be said, since it is his delay that has put him where he is in the first place.

The closet scene itself has often been cited for its grotesqueness. Polonius’s dead body is left lying onstage for most of the scene while Gertrude and Hamlet talk, paying little or no attention to it; and Hamlet rather unceremoniously drags Polonius off at the end with the line, at III.iv.186, “I’ll lug the guts into the neighbour room” (1724), to be followed at III.iv.190 by “Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you” (1724). But “grotesque” does not mean only ludicrous, irreverent, or macabre, or any combination of these three. The grotesque, in fact, is the phenomenon we characteristically get when the serious and the comic attitudes seem about equally mixed and, as a result, appear to be mocking each other. The grotesque is essentially a marriage of malicious irony and low comedy, and it is attended by a pervasive distortion and leveling of values to a common standard. Not only are moral differences among characters sharply reduced but possible options open to them in the sphere of ethical action as well: one value seems to infect the others.

Such a description of the grotesque applies perfectly to the closet scene. The serious and the comic attitudes are about equally mixed in the persons of the two “delayers,” the comic Polonius and the tragic Hamlet, each of whom mocks the other. The tragic Hamlet mocks the comic Polonius—the meddlesome, self-aggrandizing delayer—at III.iv.31-32 with the words “Take thy fortune. / Thou find’st to be too busy is some danger” (1720). The comic Polonius mock his tragic counterpart by causing Hamlet, however inadvertently, to kill him and, in killing him, not only to reduce himself, like Polonius, to the level of self-aggrandizer, but also to reduce all his previous,



worthwhile (“tragic”) delaying to nothing and thereby render it worthless. (This is probably one of the reasons Shakespeare chose to leave the body of the dead Polonius onstage: as a constant, ironic mockery of Hamlet by the “comic attitude.”)

The “malicious irony” in the closet scene is that Hamlet, in killing Polonius, dooms himself; the low comedy obtains from the treatment of the dead body by Gertrude and especially by Hamlet. The moral differences between Hamlet and Polonius disappear in the scene. Hamlet becomes a malicious murderer to Polonius’s malicious, or at least unconscionable, spy. Last, but perhaps most important, the possible options open to Hamlet in the sphere of ethical action become sharply reduced. On the immediate level, his murder of Polonius will expedite Hamlet’s departure for England and his intended execution there; and Claudius will then have escaped punishment for the crime of murdering old Hamlet. But even if Hamlet survives Claudius’s plan on his life—and of course he does—his options are limited when he returns to Denmark, for he is now a “scourge.” Even though he may kill Claudius, he will not take Claudius’s place as King of Denmark; he must himself die in divine retribution for his murder of Polonius.

Polonius’s delay, then, is intricately wound up with Hamlet’s in the play. Polonius may provide us with “comic relief” in *Hamlet*, but it is not of the gratuitous kind. Rather it is structurally necessary: his delay places Hamlet’s own tragic delay or hesitation in perspective; and it leads, in the turning point of the drama—the closet scene—to the stunning, fateful meeting of both “delaying” forces. Polonius can delay no more, for he is dead; or rather he delays, even in death, by remaining onstage as a corpse. Hamlet can delay no more, for Heaven has tried his patience, and he kills Polonius, believing him to be Claudius; or rather he too delays, in a sense, in murdering Polonius, for now his fate is in God’s hands. He is in no hurry to dispose of the body in order to protect himself. He need only wait God, and his own end, out now. As Hamlet says to Horatio at V.ii.158-160, right before the climactic duel, “If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (1751). And so, I would add, is the delay.

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### 3. STYLE AND GENRE.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “What is the style or genre of a particular play (or series of plays by the same author), and why did the playwright use such a style or genre to express his theme?”

#### “The Mystery of Shaw’s *Candida*”

George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida* (1894) was first performed at the Theatre Royal, South Shields, on March 30, 1895; it was revived by the Independent Theatre Company, at Her Majesty’s, Aberdeen, on July 30, 1897. *Candida* was first performed in London at the Stage Society, The Strand, on July 1, 1900. However, it was not until late 1903, when Arnold Daly mounted a production in New York, that the play became a success. Daly’s production was quickly followed by another one in London: the first public performance in London occurred on April 26, 1904, at the Royal Court. Yet, for all this attention to *Candida*—it was so popular that the phenomenon became known as “Candidamania”—Shaw felt that the play had been misinterpreted by some of its public. As a result, he wrote his short 1904 comedy *How He Lied to Her Husband*—which depicts a farcical version of the same situation—as a kind of reply to *Candida*. Whence did such misinterpretation of the latter play derive? Perhaps in part from Shaw’s own subtitling of it as “A Mystery.”

Elsie B. Adams was the first to take Shaw’s subtitle to mean that *Candida* is “a modern mystery play of the Madonna and Child, which will be performed in the modern equivalent to the medieval cathedral, the theatre where the catholic religion of Creative Evolution lives” (437).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, *Candida* is the name of a first-century Neapolitan Saint recognized by both the Catholic Church and the Church of England. The young poet Eugene Marchbanks himself raises the *Candida* of the play to the level of the Virgin Mother in his own mind, and both he and her husband, Reverend Morell, are children to

her, the one to be educated for passage into the mysterious night—according to Shaw, the “true realm of the poet”<sup>2</sup>—the other to be coddled within the sanctuary of marriage.

The truth about Candida, however, as Morell’s secretary, Prossy, says in Act I, is that “she’s got good hair and a tolerable figure” (99), and is “very nice, very good-hearted” (100). Candida’s name in secular usage (the English Word “candid” comes from the Latin *candidus*, meaning “white” or “bright”) suggests that she is a figure, not of mystery, but of accessibility: she is open in her knowledge and openly knowable. The eighteen-year-old prodigal Marchbanks, in need of an illusion with which to fall in love and embrace as his own, poeticizes her, only to discover at the end of the play that the woman he enshrined as an earthly variant of Titian’s Virgin is rather an efficient homemaker and caring wife, the participant in a relationship in which she needs her husband (for her defense, livelihood, and dignity, as he puts it [157]) as much as he needs her. Realizing that there is no glorification of woman possible in marriage, Marchbanks chooses to live freely outside the stultifying, compromising happiness of its bonds and attain exaltation through devotion to his art and reverence for female beauty.

This is the “secret heart” (160) that Shaw refers to in the last stage direction, and of which Candida and Morell are both ignorant. She knows that Marchbanks “has learnt to live without happiness” (159); she does not know that he predicates his ability to create great art on his unhappy existence, on the frustrations and tensions that he will simultaneously transfigure and defuse in his work. Candida cannot perceive this, since she has no real interest in art and how it is made. Indeed, *Candida* is a modern mystery to the extent that it celebrates the birth of a poet’s art. Just as the medieval mystery plays focused on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, Shaw’s drama centers on the life and death of the boy Marchbanks and his rebirth as a man, as an artist. The mysteries juxtaposed paganism against Christianity, temporal happiness against eternal peace; *Candida* juxtaposes life against art, joint marital comfort against self-dramatization or self-transmutation. Candida and Morell, unbeknownst to them, thus become Marchbanks’s spiritual mother and father, and they are comparable in their ignorance to Joseph, if not to Mary.

For reasons of health as well as for practical theatrical and artistic ones, Shaw had Candida leave her two children behind, ill, when she returns to London in the play: he was an outspoken critic of the exploitation of child actors; always a careful theater man, he was keeping *Candida*’s cast to a manageable size by excluding the children; and, as long as their existence was established, the children were not needed onstage—they would not be useful to this drama as Shaw conceived it. The effect of their exclusion, however, as

opposed to Shaw's immediate reasons for it, is to emphasize Candida and her husband's role as *Marchbanks's* parents.

On the surface, moreover, it appears that the dramatist made Morell a pastor partly out of irony: this man of the cloth fathers, not his likeness, not a servant of God, but a man of letters. In fact, to return to Adams's equation of the theater with a modern cathedral, Morell fathers a modern Jesus, an artist-genius who discerns "the distant light of the new age" and "keeps on building up his masterpieces until their pinnacles catch the glint of the unrisen sun" (Preface, *Plays Pleasant*, 9). Morell himself is the one to point out, in the play, that art has something in common with religion: "I well know that it is in the poet that the holy spirit of man—the god within him—is most godlike" (116). And as the servant of Shaw's new catholic religion, Creative Evolution, Marchbanks will have the responsibility, in Adams's words, "to represent through his art a vision of a world not yet evolved" (432).

By depicting the artist as a Christ figure and presenting his birth in the form of a mystery play, Shaw pays homage to the religious drama of the Middle Ages in addition to arguing for Creative Evolution as the religion of the twentieth century and for artists as prophets. The medieval period, he believed, created the last great art before the Renaissance because it provided "an iconography for a live religion" (Preface, *Back to Methuselah*, lxxix); with the Renaissance came religious skepticism and a resultant decline in the quality of art. Shakespeare, Shaw writes,

could not become the conscious iconographer of a religion because he had no conscious religion. He had therefore to exercise his extraordinary natural gifts in the very entertaining art of mimicry, giving us the famous "delineation of character" which makes his plays . . . so delightful. Also, he developed that curious and questionable art of building us a refuge from despair by disguising the cruelties of Nature as jokes. . . . He would really not be great at all if it were not that he had religion enough to be aware that his religionless condition was one of despair. (Preface, *Back to Methuselah*, lxxxii-lxxxiii)

"Ever since Shakespeare," Shaw continues, "playwrights have been struggling with the same lack of religion" (Preface, *Back to Methuselah*, lxxxiii). He includes among them the two giants of his own time, Ibsen and Strindberg, who "refused [their audiences] even the Shakespearian-Dickensian consolation of laughter at mischief, accurately called comic relief" (Preface, *Back to Methuselah*, lxxxiv).

Although Elsie B. Adams perceives that *Candida* is a modern mystery play of the Madonna and Child, she neglects to see the other ways in which it either imitates or extends the form of the medieval mystery. She also

gives short shrift in her essay to what I shall call the secularly mysterious aspects of Shaw's play, over which many critics have puzzled and which they have taken as the sole evidence for its subtitle. It is my contention that Shaw carefully interweaves secular *and* sacred mystery in *Candida*: that he introduces mysterious elements into the action, thereby raising questions about the plot whose answers come or are underlined, paradoxically, in the fulfillment of drama's sacred mystery.

Marchbanks introduces the first element of mystery into the play: we want to know what this eighteen-year-old disheveled aristocrat is doing in the home of Reverend and Mrs. James Morell. They have children of their own and are busy enough looking after them and Morell's congregation; therefore why would they take a stranger in? In response the question of her father, Burgess, about Marchbanks's identity, *Candida* says, "Oh, Eugene's ones of James's discoveries. He found him sleeping on the Embankment last June" (108). For what, then, has Morell discovered Marchbanks? What plans does the pastor have for the young man?

It should be clear from their confrontation before lunch in Act I that Morell wishes to domesticate Marchbanks, to set an example for him, to demonstrate to him that marriage and the family unit are the ideal state in which to live. Morell may not have been conscious of his purpose when he first brought the young man into his house, but he seems to be conscious of it by the time *Candida* and Eugene return to London. The pastor tells his young charge at one point, "I'm very fond of you, my boy; and I should like you to see for yourself what a happy thing it is to be married as I am" (113). At another point, Morell declares, "Some day, I hope and trust, you will be a happy man like me. You will be married; and you will be working with all your might and valor to make every spot on earth as happy as your own home" (116).

Ironically, Marchbanks falls in love with the pastor's own wife; equally ironically, Eugene learns through his relationship with her and her husband that marriage is not for him. That he elects at the end of the play to live the solitary life of an artist instead of ever taking a wife is the final indication that his entire education in the Morell household has tended toward the making of this choice: it was laid before him there (and there is no evidence that he had considered marriage before meeting the Morells), he discerned it, and he made his decision. Now that his education is complete, he may leave. Analogous in some ways to Christ's mission to go to earth and incarnate the sacred mystery that is God, Marchbanks's mission will be to plunge into the night and intimate, through his art, the mystery that is a perfect world. In order to do this he must, like Christ, remain single: marriage must not be allowed to interfere with his idealization of women, love, and beauty, which

is in the service of his very idealization of a future world.

The second element of mystery in the play concerns the rivalry between Morell and Marchbanks for Candida's love. The drama would appear to lie, as in conventional romantic comedy, in that rivalry. But there can be little question that Candida's love is not someone's for the taking. As she herself says in Act II,

Ah, James, how little you understand me, to talk of your confidence in my goodness and purity! I would give them both to poor Eugene as willingly as I would give my shawl to a beggar dying of cold, if there were nothing else to restrain me. Put your trust in my love for you, James, for if that went, I should care very little for your sermons—mere phrases that you cheat yourself and others with every day. (135)

The play is a mystery, then, to the extent that Marchbanks is never a serious contender for Candida's love, yet manages to precipitate a spiritual crisis in the Morell marriage.

The crisis occurs because, as Candida makes clear, the pastor misunderstands the nature of his wife's love for him, believing that "it was [in the pulpit] that [he] earned my golden moment, and the right, in that moment, to ask her to love me" (46). Morell thinks that Candida married him for his vocation, and that she is bound to him, in goodness and purity, out of duty and obligation. Thus, when Marchbanks implies toward the end of Act I that Candida merely tolerates the moralist (or Morell-ist) and windbag in her husband, the pastor feels that his marriage is threatened, that he may lose his wife to the young poet. Uncannily, as if in anticipation of this crisis in his marriage, Morell had telegraphed *before* the play to the Guild of St. Matthew to say that he would not be able to speak on the evening of the day Candida comes home. (The telegram from the Guild to which he responds in Act II is their urgent request that he change his mind; his reply here is therefore not his initial breaking of the speaking engagement as a result of his clash with Marchbanks on Act I, as is often thought, but a reiteration of the earlier cancellation.)

Aside from being mysterious in the secular sense, the trouble in the Morell marriage adds up to a religious mystery, as well. The Roman Catholic and Eastern churches recognize marriage as one of seven sacraments (actually called mysteries in the latter church), which are certain acts, ceremonies, or practices distinguished from all others among Christian rites as having been instigated by Christ as the visible means by which divine grace is sought and conferred. The Church of England, of which Morell is a clergyman, officially accepts only two sacraments, baptism and Holy Communion; nevertheless, it naturally recognizes marriage, as the following declaration by the Anglican



bishop in *Getting Married* (1908) indicates: “To me there is only one marriage that is holy: the Church’s sacrament of marriage” (236).

Morell himself gives marriage the quality of a sacrament when in Act I he says to his assistant, the young curate Lexy, “Ah, my boy, get married; get married to a good woman; and then you’ll understand. That’s a foretaste of what will be best in the Kingdom of Heaven we are trying to establish on earth” (98). The pastor says virtually the same thing to Marchbanks later in the same act: “[In marriage] you will be one of the makers of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth” (116). By the end of the play the Morell marriage itself is reborn or reconfirmed, having found its true identity in the charity and humility espoused by Jesus Christ. In *Candida* and James’s final embrace—their sacred union, as it were—the secular mystery of their marital crisis is dispelled once and for all.

Burgess introduces the third element of mystery into *Candida*: we want to know why he is visiting his daughter and her husband for the first time in three years. He says that he has come out of “family sentiment” (104): that he wants to make up the quarrel he had with James over the low wages he, Burgess, was paying to his workers. Morell does not believe him and finally declares, “Come now: either take your hat and go; or else sit down and give me a good scoundrelly reason for wanting to be friends with me. That’s right. Now out with it” (106). But Burgess does not give his son-in-law a good scoundrelly reason; instead he avoids the issue by flattering Morell, by saying that he now thinks more highly of clergymen than he once did and has come to tell James so.

Burgess is telling the truth: he now does think more highly of clergymen—but only because they have been gaining influence in the business world. He wants to reconcile with Morell so that the latter will introduce him to some big jobbers. The pastor suspects this, and we learn it when Burgess is invited to hear him speak before the Guild of St. Matthew (James decides to give the talk after all) but declines to do so until Morell says that his father-in-law can meet the “chairman” there. This man is a member of the Works Committee of the County Council and therefore has some influence in the awarding of contracts. *Candida*’s father treats the chairman, Lexy, and Prossy to a champagne supper after Morell’s speech, virtually assuring that he will receive favorable treatment from the Works Committee in the future.

Burgess thus leaves his daughter’s house having achieved exactly what he came for. The irony is that he has been encouraged in the pursuit of her husband’s friendship and its advantages by Morell himself. Burgess has been encouraged, that is, in the open and honest pursuit of his capitalistic devilry by a Christian Socialist. Morell tells his father-in-law, “So long as you come here honestly as a self-respecting, thorough, convinced scoundrel, justifying

your scoundrelism and proud of it, you are welcome. . . . I like a man to be true to himself, even in wickedness" (105-106). Like Marchbanks and like the Morell marriage, Burgess himself is reborn at the conclusion of *Candida*—not as a repentant Christian, but as a confirmed devil. He is comparable to the devil in the medieval mystery plays, as I intend to demonstrate, but, unlike them, he gets no comeuppance in the end. In the gradual reassertion of his deviltry, in fact, Burgess clears up the mystery of his sudden appearance in the Morell home.

In addition to being a mystery figure in his own right, Burgess forms, together with Lexy and Prossy, the "realistic" triangle in the play to Marchbanks's, Morell's and Candida's "mysterious" triangle. In this role the former three are not so different from the realistic figures in medieval mysteries, the purpose of whom was threefold: (1) precisely to provide an element of realism or "recognition" with which audiences seeking diversion as well as instruction could identify; (2) to put the figures of the actual mystery play in perspective; and (3) to place the devil in the comic-realistic guise of at least one dramatic character.

Alfred Turco, Jr., has described the "mysterious" triangle in *Candida* as follows:

Morell embodies genial affection and vigorous dedication to a goal, marred by lack of awareness concerning his true position in both home and pulpit. Candida exemplifies material insight and household wisdom divorced from appreciation of such higher matters as her husband's socialism or her suitor's poetry. While Marchbanks is undeniably a weak personality in some respects, the contrasts to Morell's sentimentality and Candida's mundaneness underscore his comparative toughness of mind and force of imagination. (103)

The "realistic" triangle in the play could be described in contrasting terms. Lexy idolizes Morell and, ironically, enables us to take the latter seriously, for all his pontificating, because he, Lexy, is a pale, comic imitator of his mentor. The unmarried Prossy is in love (from a distance) with Morell, and for this reason is able to see her "rival" with piercing eyes: as she says, "[I] can appreciate [Candida's] *real* qualities far better than any man can" (100; emphasis mine). Burgess obviously does not worship Morell—he wants to use him; and his very earthly and earthly presence in his daughter's home is, in effect, an argument against the idealization of her by both her husband and Marchbanks. Burgess, Lexy, and Prossy form, I hasten to add, a triangle by default. In contrast with the Marchbanks-Morell-Candida triangle, there is no romantic love among its members. Prossy tells us that Lexy thinks

her “dowdy and second rate enough” (99), and Burgess believes that both of them, as employees of his son-in-law, should be kept in their place.

The devilish Burgess, as the Christ-like Marchbanks’s opposite in the play, deserves discussion in greater detail. Jacob H. Adler, sensing the mystery of Marchbanks’s disruption of the Morell household, has written that “Shaw’s whole story is very close to much ado about nothing” (57). He adds that “the presence of a character [Burgess] who feels this way himself is disarming” (57). Burgess’s response to Morell’s sermonizing, Marchbanks’s “poetic horrors” (which he gets when he realizes that Candida does menial chores along with the servants), and his daughter’s independence of mind is to conclude that all three characters are mad, since they grossly overstate their complaints or opinions. He thus functions as a comic devil who cannot take seriously the “mysteries” unfolding before him, or who simply does not understand them. Candida’s father is funny precisely because he combines equal amounts of ignorance and arrogance in the same character.

Like the devil figures of medieval mystery plays, who often were composites of the worst sins that the audience could commit, Burgess is a stand-in for any audience of *Candida*, from Shaw’s day to our own, as his name indicates. *Les bourgeois* identify with Burgess. (The archaic meaning of “burgess,” derived from Middle English, is “an inhabitant of a town or borough with full rights of citizenship.”) This is not to say we completely identify with his point of view on the action—we cannot, the most important reason for this being that he is not onstage at the crucial moments in the Marchbanks-Morell-Candida story. What Burgess does is to drain off our own devilish disbelief in the feasibility of Marchbanks’s assault on the Morell marriage. As Adler puts it, “Paradoxically enough, the audience can take events [onstage] more seriously, precisely because Burgess does not” (57). He pulls us back from the action, so that we can observe it for the insights it contains into marriage—between male and female, on the one hand, and between the artist and his muse, on the other.

If Burgess pulls us back from the action, representing the comically objective point of view on it, Marchbanks takes us into the action, personifying subjective submersion in it. Their opposition is reinforced, paradoxically, by their similarities: both are outsiders—Burgess by virtue of having been estranged from his daughter and her family for three years—and both are alone. Marchbanks is estranged from his own family and has been living outdoors; Burgess has been living by himself in the house he once shared with Candida. (He never mentions his wife, who we may assume is dead, or any other family members.) The two men are at opposite ends of the play’s social ladder, however, with the young aristocrat at the top and the old Cockney at the bottom. And they pursue mutually exclusive interests: the

one, art for humanity's sake; the other, commerce for money's sake. When they meet for the first time, Marchbanks nearly runs away from Burgess, so dissimilar are they in motive, temperament, appearance, and social station.

Marchbanks has been sleeping on the Embankment (a road and river-walk along the north bank of the River Thames in London), and "in [his] garments he has apparently lain in the heather and waded through the waters" (109). He was originally called Majoribanks, but this was shortened by Shaw to what would be heard in normal pronunciation. "Majoribanks," it's true, would have offered upper-class echoes to Shaw's audiences, since the name was a familiar one in Victorian life, in both society and government; that Eugene was the nephew of an earl would nonetheless have been believable from his name, despite its blurring by Shaw for the sake of production.

Burgess is clearly Marchbanks's opposite in origin, a Cockney elevated by money into a petty bourgeois. He has been sleeping in his own large house, attended by a servant: the petty bourgeois has enclosed himself in comfort and plenty. (Another origin of "burgess" is the old French "burgeis," meaning a castle or fortified town.) Whereas Burgess dismisses as madness what he cannot understand about his daughter and her husband, Marchbanks takes Morell and Candida very seriously and finally penetrates to their core. He is utterly sincere and completely without humor, Burgess, by contrast, is most insincere and likes a good laugh. Ironically, Marchbanks forgets, in his worship of Candida, that she is a Burgess—her father's daughter, and so named before she acquired through marriage the surname of Morell. It would not have occurred to Eugene that the Virgin Mother herself was of lowly birth, but it would have occurred to Shaw.

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Perhaps as a deliberate Shavian paradox, *Candida* employs the form of a mystery play to present three "faiths": those of marriage, art, and capitalism. It even makes room for an additional faith nearly heretical to true religion: worship of another mortal, as practiced by Lexy and Prossy toward Morell. The play is hardly a vindication of Victorian marriage, as its original audiences believed, but neither is it a total rejection of marriage as an institution in favor of the solitary pursuit of an artistic vision. *Candida* is not an apology for Burgess's capitalism, either, but it is also not a denunciation of his money-grabbing in favor of selfless devotion to a higher cause. Rather, the play's balanced, humanitarian view simultaneously stresses the necessity of the comparative safety and restricted bliss of domestic life for some people, and the requirement of others that they have the unchecked freedom to plumb the depths of holy, artistic night; the need for some to live their lives

in the service or imitation of another, for others to dedicate their energies to self-aggrandizement, to making themselves wealthy and powerful.

As Elsie B. Adams has written, “Religion to Shaw does not signify orthodoxy or sectarianism. [His] Creative Evolution encompasses all sincerely held beliefs, including the Christian Socialism of Morell, the revolution doctrine of John Tanner [from *Man and Superman* (1903)], the Catholicism of Saint Joan [from the 1923 play of the same name], even the capitalism of Andrew Undershaft [from *Major Barbara* (1905)]” (431-432, note). Shaw believed that the drive of the will was toward ultimate good. Thus any sincere manifestation of it, even if it appeared evil on the surface (as capitalism does to many), would ultimately contribute to the improvement of the human condition. Artists like Marchbanks may be in the vanguard of Creative Evolution, but they are not the only soldiers in its army. Hence, in addition to Marchbanks, the Morell marriage and Burgess are reborn at the end of this mystery play. The poet, the pastor, and the businessman have each learned to live in self-knowledge instead of self-deception—in candidness, if you will, rather than contrivance.

## Notes

1. Shaw had the following to say about Creative Evolution:

What hope is there then of human improvement? According to the Neo-Darwinists, to the Mechanists, no hope whatever, because improvement can come only through some senseless accident that must, on the statistical average of accidents, be presently wiped out by some other equally senseless accident.

But this dismal creed does not discourage those who believe that the impulse that produces evolution is creative. They have observed the simple fact that the will to do anything can and does, at a certain pitch of intensity set up by conviction of its necessity, create and organize new tissue to do it with. (Preface to *Back to Methuselah*, xvi)

...

Creative Evolution is already a religion, and is indeed now unmistakably the religion of the twentieth century, newly arisen from the ashes of pseudo-Christianity, of mere skepticism, and of the soulless affirmations and blind negations of the Mechanists and Neo-Darwinians. (Preface to *Back to Methuselah*, lxxviii)

2. Following the Wagner of *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), Shaw described night as the “true realm of the poet” in a letter concerning the “secret” of

*Candida*. The letter, dated March 8, 1920, is quoted in full in Riding, 506; Riding's article is anthologized in Stanton, 166-169 (the phrase "true realm of the poet" appears on p. 168).

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## “Pinter as Painter-Poet, Pinter as Comedian: Notes, Mostly on *The Birthday Party*”

In Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1958) we don’t know what Stanley has done wrong, and we don’t even know if Goldberg and McCann are apprehending the right man. Stanley is simply the victim, while Goldberg and McCann are the victimizers. Although Goldberg and McCann are each distinctively characterized by Pinter, as a team they remain unidentified: they work for someone else (a man named Monty, about whom we learn almost nothing), and are sent to the Boles house (if it is the right house) to do a job. Pinter emphasizes the essential anonymity of Goldberg and McCann at two crucial moments in the play. The first time, when they interrogate Stanley right before the birthday party in Act II, just after they have met him. (We are not even sure that it is Stanley’s birthday: Meg says it is; he says it is not.) Here is a selection from the interrogation, which goes on for five pages in the text:

GOLDBERG. Where is your lechery leading you?

McCANN. You’ll pay for this.

GOLDBERG. You stuff yourself with dry toast.

McCANN. You contaminate womankind.

GOLDBERG. Why don’t you pay the rent?

McCANN. Mother defiler!

GOLDBERG. Why do you pick your nose?

McCANN. I demand justice!

...

McCANN. You betrayed our land.

GOLDBERG. You betray our breed.

McCANN. Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG. What makes you think you exist?

McCANN. You’re dead.

GOLDBERG. You’re dead. (51-52)

Pinter emphasizes the anonymity of Goldberg and McCann for the second time when they “woo [Stanley], gently and with relish” (82) the morning after the birthday party, right before they take him away from the Boles home for good. For two pages they carry on with lines such as these:

McCANN. You’re a dead duck.

GOLDBERG. But we can save you.

McCANN. From a worse fate.

GOLDBERG. True.

McCANN. Undeniable.

GOLDBERG. From now on, we'll be the hub of your wheel.

McCANN. We'll renew your season ticket.

GOLDBERG. We'll take tuppence off your morning tea.

McCANN. We'll give you a discount on all inflammable goods.

GOLDBERG. We'll watch over you.

McCANN. Advise you.

GOLDBERG. Give you proper care and treatment. (82)

It is important to notice right away that the charges Goldberg and McCann make against Stanley are either too specific (and ridiculous) or too general. They do not charge him with any one crime; they charge him with everything from leaving his fiancée waiting at the church (if in fact he was engaged) to betraying the organization, from not bathing regularly to being a traitor to the cloth (assuming that he was once a priest!). His crime becomes unascertainable, because he could not possibly have done all the things they say he has. We never know *what* he's done wrong. Even the promises Goldberg and McCann make to Stanley about his future life with them are either too specific or too general: they promise him virtually everything, so we don't know what they are going to do for him, if in fact they're going to do anything.

*How* Goldberg and McCann make their charges against and promises to Stanley is more interesting from the point of view of these two characters' anonymity, however, than are the charges and promises themselves. Goldberg and McCann are anonymous in their comforting of as well as in their attack on Stanley, because they share antiphonally a single point of view: they could exchange lines without changing the meaning of either sequence. This curiously stylized dialogue serves as an instrument of great dramatic power. Here the playwright obtains the suggestion of a cumulative force of opposition to the individual, intense and relentless. Necessarily, the more sharply defined outlines of the characters blur as they merge with one another, but the abstract force of oppression comes clearer as a result. The effect is one of generalization, minimizing distinctions between members of the oppositional force, concentrating on outward action rather than inward character.

Goldberg and McCann are not themselves the oppressors of Stanley Webber. They have been sent by those oppressors to apprehend him. They are agents of a higher force that has decided Stanley's fate. Indeed, they seem to know as little about him as he knows about them; we sense that they may not know his exact crime. They are in the end anonymous, faceless, and Pinter points this up quintessentially in their two long "duets." When Goldberg and McCann are finished with Stanley, he is an anonymous victim: he wears a bowler hat, "a dark well cut suit and white collar" (81) instead of

his own clothes, and he can neither see (McCann has broken his glasses) nor speak. Goldberg and McCann have to help him out of his chair and escort him as all three leave the Boles house at the end of the play. They leave behind a Lulu who has had anonymous sex with Goldberg the night before and feels that she has been used, as well as a Meg and a Petey who, in her senility and his preoccupation with his work and his newspaper, are nearly strangers to each other. (Meg is oblivious even to Stanley's final departure.)

More than most plays, *The Birthday Party* seems, finally, to be about six characters with secret knowledge about themselves and only partial knowledge of others and the world. These six meet and interact in the living room of the Boles house over a twenty-four-hour period, but nobody really gets to know anyone better and no character learns the reason for Goldberg and McCann's mission. Precisely because no character gets to know another one well and no character finds out or reveals what (if anything) Stanley has done wrong, the reader or spectator is held more by the characters themselves, by their elusiveness, than by the overt drama—the abduction of Stanley. The abduction of Stanley becomes an excuse, if you will, for displaying the characters' inscrutability. This inscrutability takes its extreme form in the anonymous "duets" of Goldberg and McCann, where Pinter blurs the identities of the two and multiplies their charges against Stanley, in order to discourage the audience from blaming the men individually for Stanley's abduction and from seeking to know the reason for it.

But inscrutability also takes subtle form in the speeches of four characters. Stanley, Meg, Goldberg, and McCann all speak about their pasts. Goldberg does this the most, Stanley a few times. Meg and McCann speak of their pasts once, in tandem, during the party:

McCANN. I know a place. Roscrea. Mother Nolan's.

MEG. There was a night-light in my room, when I was a little girl.

McCANN. One time I stayed there all night with the boys. Singing and drinking all night.

MEG. And my Nanny used to sit up with me, and sing songs to me.

McCANN. And a plate of fry in the morning. Now where am I?

MEG. My little room was pink. I had a pink carpet and pink curtains, and I had musical boxes all over the room. And they played me to sleep. And my father was a very big doctor. That's why I never had any complaints. I was cared for, and I had little sisters and brothers in other rooms, all different colours. Tullamore, where are you? (60)

Paradoxically, speeches like these, in revealing something about the characters' pasts, reveal how little we actually know about these people,

how much they keep to themselves. Ironically, Lulu and Petey, who do not speak of their pasts at all, seem the most knowable, the most familiar. They are never onstage together in *The Birthday Party*, and one suspects that this is through the playwright's design. If they were onstage together right before Stanley's departure, one would expect them to question Goldberg and McCann more incisively than each does alone and perhaps to get an answer or two. On the subject of such answers or what he calls "because," Pinter said the following in a 1966 interview:

I do so hate the because of drama. Who are we to say that this happens because that happened, that one thing is the consequence of another? How do we know? What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy? The most we know for sure is that the things which have happened have happened in a certain order: any connections we think we see, or choose to make, are pure guesswork. Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me. (Taylor, 184)

It is not to Pinter's point to reveal why Goldberg and McCann have come to get Stanley or what Stanley has done to deserve abduction, so he keeps apart the two characters interested in obtaining this information. He is concerned above all to map his characters' opaqueness or mystery. To this end, he makes Lulu and Petey unknown to each other: neither speaks the other's name, and neither hears the other's name spoken. It is as if they come to the play from separate worlds. In the world of the play, they take their place among characters who call attention to one another by contrast rather than illuminate one another through conflict and disputation.

Pinter wrote a poem about *The Birthday Party* titled "A View of the Party":

The thought that Goldberg was  
A man she might have known  
Never crossed Meg's words  
That morning in the room.

...

The thought that Goldberg was  
A man to dread and know  
Jarred Stanley in the blood  
When, still, he heard his name.

While Petey knew, not then,  
But later, when the light

Full up upon their scene,  
He looked into the room.

...

The thought that Goldberg was  
Sat in the centre of the room,  
A man of weight and time,

...

And Stanley sat—alone,  
A man he might have known,  
Triumphant on his hearth,  
Which never was his own.

... (34-36, *Poems*)

I would emphasize the title of this poem: “A *View* of the Party”; and I would also emphasize that Pinter felt the need to envision, or create an image of, his play in poetic form. This poem paints a word-picture of the Boles living room and its occupants. Poems, and paintings, can create images of action or behavior without having to explain the causes and effects. Plays have a harder time doing this, obviously, because in a play events occur in a certain order and spectators automatically look for connections in that order (“this happens because that happened”). One cannot help but feel that Pinter wrote a poem about *The Birthday Party* because he wished his play to be seen as a poem, as the *image* of an action rather than the *imitation* of one. “Image” here implies simultaneity, “imitation,” sequentiality. And Pinter would probably compress the entire action of *The Birthday Party* into a single moment if he could, so that we would concentrate above all not on the “because” of the drama, but on the simultaneous irreducibility and appeal of its characters and the topography of their relations. Just as Stanley seems to be an artist out of his element, Pinter seems in this play to be an artist out of his. Unlike Stanley, however, who fails to impose his will on hostile surroundings, the playwright successfully struggles to impose his painterly or poetic vision on a recalcitrant dramatic form.

Pinter also wrote a poem about *Old Times* (1971), called “All of That” (39, *Poems*). He has not written poems about all his plays, but, I would submit, much of his work can be looked at as poetic or painterly, as an attempt to delineate rather than explain. Thus one can speak of *Old Times* as dramatizing not so much the inexplicable as the invisible. *The Homecoming* (1965), for its part, could be said to dramatize the improbable, the inconceivable. And *The Birthday Party* might best be described as dramatizing the unknowable, the impenetrable. In all three plays Pinter, more like a painter or poet than a dramatist, is not concerned to probe character, to psychologize it. Instead he

is interested in outlining, even extending, the human figure, in framing the space between people and between words (thus one explanation for the many pauses and silences in his work), in words themselves as objects stripped of their arbitrary meanings and worthy of presentation in their own right, without connection to fact or intention, history or psychology. Like Stanley (and Deeley from *Old Times*, as well as Teddy from *The Homecoming*), Pinter seems to be a stranger in the house he calls home, a man of painterly or poetic sensibility compelled for reasons unknown to write dramas. (It is certainly not by chance that from time to time during his career he wrote for the screen, where the image is dominant and where silence is as important as the soundtrack.)

\* \* \*

Harold Pinter's painterly-poetic dramas can at times be hilarious as well as terrifying and mysterious, yet few critics have given any serious attention to the comic element in his work (one exception is Elin Diamond). The comedy is perhaps less apparent in reading the plays than in seeing them on stage, where we have far less time to investigate the significance of every word and gesture and as a result respond largely intuitively to the action. The comedy often comes from the collision of what the audience expects to happen and what actually happens. It can be something as little and tried as the following exchange between Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*:

McCANN. This job—no, listen—this job, is it going to be like anything we've ever done before?

GOLDBERG. Tch, tch, tch.

McCANN. No, just tell me that. Just that, and I won't ask any more.  
(*Goldberg sighs, stands, goes behind the table, ponders, looks at McCann, and then speaks in a quiet, fluent, official tone.*)

GOLDBERG. The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements, however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activities. All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satisfied?

McCANN. Sure. Thank you, Nat. (29-30)

Or the comedy can be something as large and shocking as the opening scene between Max and Lenny in *The Homecoming*. We expect father and son to treat each other as we *think* they should. But a violent argument ensues over something as minor as a pair of scissors, and Lenny calls his

father first a “daft prat” (7) and then a “stupid sod” (9), while Max lifts his cane and threatens to chop his son’s spine off (9). Perhaps the most famous examples of Pinter’s comedy of surprise, as I shall call it, are also from *The Homecoming*: two long speeches by Lenny that are by now notorious. In the first, he describes to Ruth in the calmest manner and the most matter-of-fact language his beating and contemplated murder of a prostitute (30-31). And in the second speech, he begins by telling of his once agreeing, like an upstanding citizen and good Samaritan, to help an old lady move her mangle from the front room of her house to the back—only to turn into a monster and assault her (32-33).

Throughout Pinter’s plays, characters surprise us by the manner in which they treat each other, or by the manner in which they express the matter at hand. In the example I gave from *The Birthday Party*, note how Goldberg describes their job (apprehending Stanley) to McCann in almost scientific jargon. The effect of this comedy of surprise is, of course, to make us laugh, but, more important, it is also to shock, to disturb us profoundly, because of the disparity between what is said and how it is said; between what is said and who is saying it; between what we hear and how we respond to it. Pinter gives us plays that are, finally, conundrums: characters speak in language that we do not feel is appropriate to the situation, and we respond to what they say in a manner that seems similarly inappropriate; behavior occurs whose origins are obscure; the characters in fact know more than we do, which is a reversal of traditional dramatic irony. Nothing is explained, and that is the point. All our ways of penetrating the world fall by the wayside.

I am not saying that reasons cannot be given, for example, for what Lenny says to Ruth; I am simply maintaining that it is more a case of the play’s not contradicting such reasons than of its actually containing them. Furthermore, any explanation of Lenny’s behavior would pale beside the fact, the outrage, of it. Pinter is right in calling his plays strictly (if bizarrely) realistic, as he has done a number of times in a number of different places (157, Esslin): seeing *The Birthday Party* or *The Homecoming* is like looking through the “fourth wall” of a complete stranger’s house and taking in, but not fully comprehending, all the events that transpire there. Pinter’s art, at its best, could be called a running protest against the *meaningfulness* of life (not a protest against its meaninglessness, a kind of attack on life, as the proponents of the Theater of the Absurd would have it). This is the larger “meaning” in his work that has been overlooked, I think, in the futile search for the motivation of his characters, for the causes of all the brutal and fantastic behavior we see, a search that mirrors our constant inquiry outside the theater into the significance of every little action and event and ultimately into the meaning of life itself.



I see Pinter's plays as elements of one large ritualistic mystery, and I see that mystery as a healthy corrective to a modern world that wants to know everything, that seems to think everything can be explained. The comedy of life, according to Pinter, is in thinking that we have all the answers when we don't, in believing that we control when in reality we are often being controlled. The real drama in his plays is, in a sense, less on stage than in the house. The characters, in knowing more than we do, collaborate with the author to unsettle and, at best, re-create us.

I don't think it is any accident that the more we have come to realize—from, say, the 1990s to the early twenty-first century—that much about the world defies explanation (including, most obviously, its ultimate reason for being) even if human existence itself is not “absurd,” the less popular Harold Pinter has become. (He began writing plays in the late 1950s.) His later plays appear tired and repetitive (when they are not being overtly political), as if they're telling us something that we already know. We do, of course, thanks in large part to Pinter.

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## 4. LANGUAGE, SYMBOL, AND ALLUSION.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “How would you distinguish the use of language and imagery, or visual motifs, in a particular play from that of other plays?”

### “Birth and Death in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*”

Images of birth and death, of rebirth and death-in-life, abound in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), but they are most prominent in several scenes whose juxtaposition reveals meaning that less formalistic considerations of the play often overlook. Williams counterpoints these scenes in order to suggest that Stanley’s and Blanche’s pasts and futures were not and will not be so different, and thus that they are less villain and victim—as Marxist and feminist critics like to contend—than mutual victims of desire. Hence the very title of the play, whose streetcar bears both this man of the street and this plantation-belle-become-streetwalker to their respective dooms. A close reading of scenes 5, 7, 9, 10, and 11 will support my thesis, and it is just such close reading, I would argue, that tends to be absent from sociopolitical essays using *Streetcar* as one more piece of evidence in their continuing indictment of materialist, misogynous American society.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, simplistically assert that *A Streetcar Named Desire* “dramatizes the dynamics of the battering of women” (50), that Stanley “represents in his brutishness the phallic origin of the male species” (51), and that the drama’s homosexual author “brilliantly indict[s] . . . the streetcar named heterosexual desire” (52). But can this play really be reduced to a diatribe against heterosexual desire—Blanche’s as well as Stanley’s—as opposed to homosexual desire? Aren’t Gilbert and Gubar guilty here of the intentional fallacy as well as their own peculiar brand of sexism? And if *Streetcar* is an indictment of anything, isn’t it an indictment of

*excessive* desire instead of desire itself? Of emotional violence against human beings—Blanche’s against her young husband, Allan Grey, Stanley’s against Blanche, hers against him—in addition to an indictment of physical violence against women?

As I have argued elsewhere (Cardullo, 149), Stanley Kowalski is no mere phallic brute intent on subjugating the opposite sex, no mere violent defender of the patriarchal order, despite assertions to the contrary by Anca Vlasopolos and Pamela Anne Hanks<sup>1</sup> as well as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Before Blanche’s arrival, Stanley and Stella enjoyed, through compromise, an intimate, happy marriage, and in this could be said to have achieved a degree of civilization, of humanity, unequaled by the DuBoises of Belle Reve; before Blanche’s arrival, Stanley also enjoyed the best of friendships with Mitch, who in some ways is as sensitive and in need of understanding as Blanche. Elia Kazan understood Stanley Kowalski’s character in the original production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and therefore cast the appealing Marlon Brando in the role (in contrast to the gruff Anthony Quinn, who played Stanley opposite Uta Hagen during the play’s first European tour). About Brando’s performance, Irwin Shaw wrote at the time:

He is so amusing in a direct, almost childlike way in the beginning, and we have been so conditioned by the modern doctrine that what is natural is good, that we admire him and sympathize with him. Then, bit by bit, with a full account of what his good points really are, we come dimly to see that he is . . . brutish, destructive in his healthy egotism, dangerous, immoral, surviving. (35)

Marxist critics offer a reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as superficial as that of the feminists when they analyze, not the play Williams wrote, but the one they wish he had written. Thus Yuri Zubkov can ask, “What is the social conflict? What kinds of social forces do Stanley and his friends, on the one hand, and Blanche, on the other, personify?” He gives the following answer:

When it comes to Blanche, the situation is clear: first, owner of a patrimonial estate, then a teacher, and, at the same time, half a whore, half a priestess of love. But who are Stanley, Mitch, Pablo, Steve? They are laborers . . . They are separate individuals but none of them knows anything except poker, bars, and fights. And they are made to personify the American working class. (Quoted in Vulf, 61; cited in Shaland, 17-18)

Clearly, Stanley, Mitch, Pablo, and Steve are not the ideal laborers Zubkov had envisioned.

Maya Koreneva, for her part, accepts the brutality of these four men and sees “connections between [it] and the fundamental laws of American society.” But she faults Williams for not exploring those connections, for not analyzing the socioeconomic causes of his male characters’ brutality:

What phenomena are responsible for the use of violence and its continuing rule in [the United States]? Why have violence and ruthlessness become the social norms? It is absolutely useless to try to find in [Williams’ play] any answers to these important questions. (24; cited in Shaland, 18)

Vitaly Vulf, by contrast, commends Williams for revealing social causes beneath the cover of psychological conflicts; he sees Blanche’s downfall as the result, less of her sexual dissoluteness and hypersensitivity, than of the death of the Southern aristocracy and the rise of the common man (68; referenced in Shaland, 18). In Vulf’s view, Blanche is the product of one evil system—the feudalism of the old South—and the victim of another—the capitalism of the rejuvenated Union.

Some American critics have seen a similar social transition in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but they usually put a positive spin on it. Jacob H. Adler, for instance, writes the following in his essay “Tennessee Williams’ South: The Culture and the Power”: “Blanche has in her something of a genuine culture and beauty that Stella has abandoned and that Stanley cannot see; and, as with the aristocrats in *The Cherry Orchard*, we must regret its passing, even as we recognize the decadence and futility and even degradation that make its passing both necessary and inevitable” (42). Harry Taylor is one of those American Marxists who put a negative spin on the social transition in *Streetcar*, albeit a spin whose negativity is confused, since he seems to champion the patrician Blanche at the expense of the plebeian (if patriotically capitalistic) Stanley:

The characters [Williams] hates or fears or despises always win; while those to whom his sympathy is drawn inevitably go down. In such a context there can be no conflict, . . . no future except for evil. . . . Great drama cannot emerge out of flight and hysteria, but arises from genuine conflict, an element that can only be generated by the writer’s conviction that the battle is vital and that the means to wage it exist. Williams will write greatly only if he can re-examine reality and . . . recognize . . . that the forces of good in this world are adult and possess both the will and the power to change our environment. . . . Surely the absence of the socio-historic periphery in the author’s

mind weakens his attack . . . , depriving it of the aura of larger reality and of moral conviction. (52, 54-55)

My problem with Taylor's reading, as with the readings of Jacob H. Adler, the Russian Marxists, and the American feminists, is that it ignores the *human* element in the play, the struggle between Blanche and Stanley as human beings, as individuals, instead of as social symbols or gender representatives. These characters are human beings *first*, and it is as a complex being that Tennessee Williams presents each one to us, not as victor or victim, oppressor or oppressed, working man or decadent woman. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not thus reducible to a sociological-cum-political tract, a mere reflection of its critics' theoretical or geo-historical biases, and I hope to demonstrate this through a detailed examination of selected scenes from the play. My method is formalistic, which is to say that it depends on formal considerations and organic connections within the work of art itself, not on a conceptual framework imposed on the art object from without.

Such conceptual frameworks, in my view, often substitute their own visions for those of the artwork itself. How are they able to do this? By ignoring the text, by eschewing close analysis or reading—a consideration of as many elements as possible in a scene's makeup—for selective perusal—a consideration of only those aspects that support the critic's ideological bent. I must stress this point. For the reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that follows gains what authority it possesses from its thoroughness and depth, not from any ideological conviction behind it. I unabashedly declare that I have no ideological axe to grind—unless, like some leftists, one considers humanism an ideology—and that the only theory that resides in my interpretation of *Streetcar* is that the play's the thing, not the theory; that the playwright is king, not the critic; that art and the artist are meant to be served, not supplanted. I suffer, then, from what could be called the aesthetic bias: the compulsion to treat works of art as *works of art*, as alternative worlds to our own that are at once coherent and mysterious, compelling and cathartic, humane and cruel—in a word, seductively inviolable.

Let me begin my investigation of birth-and-death imagery in the play, and by extension of the fates of Blanche and Stanley, with Scene 7, throughout much of which Williams interweaves Blanche's singing of "It's Only a Paper Moon" in the bathroom while Stanley reveals her lurid past to Stella in the kitchen. Of course, this juxtaposition is immediately comic: the gruff Stanley complains to the quiet Stella about all the lies Blanche has been telling, at the same time as Blanche herself sings "*blithely*" of love, according to Williams' stage direction (360), and thoroughly enjoys her bath. Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois are so different, it seems, that their very presence together on



the same stage is funny, and it is even funnier here since Blanche is oblivious to Stanley's revelations about her past and, later, his need to use his own bathroom.

Williams is trying to do more in this scene, however, than create a comic juxtaposition.<sup>2</sup> The content of the song Blanche sings is as important to an interpretation of the scene as the fact that she is singing blithely. Blanche sings the following verses from "It's Only a Paper Moon," a popular song by Harold Arlen that was published in 1933, with lyrics by E. Y. Harburg and Billy Rose:

Say, it's only a paper moon,  
Sailing over a cardboard sea—  
But it wouldn't be make-believe  
If you believed in me! (360)

It's a Barnum and Bailey world,  
Just as phony as it can be—  
But it wouldn't be make-believe  
If you believed in me! (360)

Without your love,  
It's a honky-tonk parade!  
Without your love,  
It's a melody played  
In a penny arcade . . . (361)

It is no accident that Williams chooses this song for Blanche to sing. It is her birthday, and a birthday supper is planned at Stanley and Stella's apartment, to which Mitch is invited. (The day is September 15<sup>th</sup>, and Blanche and Mitch have been dating for some time.) Blanche is singing on one level of her hope that Mitch will believe in her, that he will love and marry her. The world that Blanche has created for Mitch is "make-believe" and "phony" (360): she has lied to him about her past, painting a portrait of herself as an old-fashioned girl with high ideals and strict morals. But Blanche suggests that this world would not be make-believe if Mitch believed in and married her. Then she would truly become what she has pretended she is: a proper, loving, faithful woman. Blanche thus hopes to celebrate the day of her birth as the day of her rebirth through union with Mitch. She bathes in this scene—as she does many other times during her stay with the Kowalskis—not only to cool off from the heat, but also to cleanse or purify herself, in a sense, of her past sexual indiscretions, to be reborn as it were. After her bath in Scene

2, for example, she declares to Stanley, "Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand new human being!" (276).

The comedy in Scene 7 is undercut by our knowledge that, even as Blanche sings her love song, Stanley is telling Stella, as he has already told Mitch, of the "phony" image Blanche has been presenting all summer. Stanley has made sure that Mitch will not be coming over for supper, and Stanley will soon give Blanche her only birthday present: a bus ticket back to the real world of her past, in Laurel, Mississippi, that she has been trying to deny since arriving in New Orleans. Without Mitch's love, Blanche's world will become a kind of "honky-tonk parade," a "melody played in a penny arcade" (361): accordingly, during the rape in Scene 10, we hear the "*Blue Piano*," drums, and a "*hot trumpet*" (401-402); and as Blanche is being led away to an insane asylum in Scene 11, we hear "*the swelling music of the 'Blue Piano' and the muted trumpet*" (419). Without Mitch's love, Blanche's world will also become "make-believe" and "phony" in another sense: she will lose her mind and believe that the Doctor who has come to get her is her old beau Shep Huntleigh, with whom she will embark shortly on a Caribbean cruise.

At the end of Scene 8, after the birthday supper unattended by Mitch, Stella's labor pains begin and Stanley rushes her to the hospital: the imminent birth of their child has, in this way, substituted for Blanche's failed rebirth.<sup>3</sup> Then, in Scene 9, Mitch appears and confronts Blanche about her past, armed with the truth that Stanley has provided him. During this confrontation, "*a blind Mexican woman in a dark shawl, carrying bunches of those gaudy tin flowers that lower-class Mexicans display at funerals and other festive occasions*" (387), comes up to the door of the Kowalski apartment trying to sell some of her "flowers for the dead" (*flores para los muertos* [388]). Little attention has been paid by critics to the role of the Mexican Woman Vendor in Scene 9, since it seems fairly obvious that she is meant to be a kind of death figure with whom Blanche comes face to face as the latter is beginning to experience the spiritual death—paradoxically, on her birthday—that will lead to her commitment to an asylum. The Mexican Woman becomes a visual symbol of Blanche's fate, then. But Williams' choice of a *blind Mexican* woman to sell "flowers for the dead"—gaudy tin flowers at that—and his movement of her onto and off the stage greatly enhance the power and richness of this symbol.

The Mexican Woman is not simply a symbol of the death or doom that awaits Blanche. Williams uses this vendor not only to ordain the future, but also to recapitulate the past. She becomes, in her blindness, a symbol of all the deaths at Belle Reve that helped to deplete Blanche's finances and break her will. (Blanche told us in Scene 1 that "the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep!" [262].) The blind Mexican Woman finds her way to Blanche's doorstep in Scene 9; she seems to stalk Blanche, even as death blindly stalked

the DuBois family at Belle Reve. The moment Blanche slams the door on the Mexican Woman, the former begins talking to an uncomprehending Mitch about all the death that plagued Belle Reve, as if the Mexican Woman herself had suggested the topic for conversation.

The “flowers for the dead” that the Mexican Woman sells are themselves symbolic of the many deaths at Belle Reve that helped to drive the DuBois family into bankruptcy—a symbolism that is underlined by the juxtaposition of the Mexican Woman’s calls with Blanche’s evocation of the dying that surrounded her:

MEXICAN WOMAN (*she turns away and starts to move down the street*). Flores. Flores para los muertos . . . (*The polka tune fades in.*)

BLANCHE (*as if to herself*). Crumble and fade and—regrets—recriminations . . . “If you’d done this, it wouldn’t’ve cost me that!”

MEXICAN WOMAN. Coronas para los muertos. Coronas . . .

BLANCHE. Legacies! Huh. . . . And other things such as blood-stained pillow-slips—“Her linen needs changing”—“Yes, Mother. But couldn’t we get a colored girl to do it?” No, we couldn’t of course. Everything gone but the—

MEXICAN WOMAN. Flores.

BLANCHE. Death—I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are. . . . We didn’t even dare admit we had ever heard of it! (388-389)

Williams has the Mexican Woman offer “flowers for the dead” to Blanche partly because, were Blanche to die now, she could afford no better flowers for her own funeral. But the flowers are also symbolic, in their gaudy tininess and their display at festive occasions” (387) as well as at funerals, of all the cheap, good times that Blanche enjoyed with strangers, young soldiers, high-school boys. They are symbolic of the desire that finally lost Blanche her job at the high school in Laurel, and also of the larger desire that seems always to have characterized and divided the DuBois family, from the “epic fornications” (284) of the men to Stella’s elemental lust for Stanley. Once Blanche slams the door on the Mexican Woman, she speaks not only of all the death at Belle Reve, but also of all the desire she cultivated in order to forget death. Again, the Mexican Woman, with her “gaudy tin flowers” (387), has provided Blanche with her cue and continues to cue her as she chronicles the slaking of her desire:

MEXICAN WOMAN. Flores para los muertos, flores—flores . . .

BLANCHE. The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder! Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers.

On Saturday nights they would go in town to get drunk—

MEXICAN WOMAN (*softly*). Coronas . . .

BLANCHE. —and on the way back they would stagger onto my lawn and call—“Blanche! Blanche!”—the deaf old lady remaining suspected nothing. But sometimes I slipped outside to answer their calls. . . . Later the paddy-wagon would gather them up like daisies . . . the long way home . . . (*The Mexican Woman turns slowly and drifts back off with her soft mournful cries. . . .*) [389]

So Williams has summarized, through the symbol of the Mexican Woman, the forces behind the play’s tragedy: the desire of the DuBois men that squandered away the family fortune and deprived the family of love; the sickness and dying that finally bankrupted the family; and the desire that Blanche used to escape death and achieve intimacy with others, however fleeting. When Blanche finishes speaking of death and desire in Scene 9, she is confronted with a Mitch who wants what he has “been missing all summer” (389). She is confronted, in other words, with yet another reminder of her past—a man who wants a cheap, good time. The cheap, good time that Stanley has at Blanche’s expense in Scene 10 is, of course, what seals her doom. Her desire will have led to her spiritual death, even as the illicit desire of her forebears led ultimately to the death of the DuBois line and the loss of Belle Reve.

It is entirely appropriate that a Mexican woman of the lower class becomes the cumulative symbol of death and desire in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The Mexican Woman speaks a foreign language and repeats one sentence over and over again (“Flores [or ‘corones’] para los muertos” [388]); Blanche taught English and is highly articulate. The Mexican Woman is poor, and from a poor foreign country; Blanche’s family was once wealthy, and Blanche is proud of her Southern aristocratic heritage. The Mexican Woman, probably old and wearing a dark shawl, is anything but sexually attractive; Blanche once prided herself on her ability to attract men with her good looks and nice clothes. The Mexican Woman, then, represents all that Blanche once thought she was above, and all that she has now become: a foreigner of sorts in New Orleans without a penny, whose language is not understood by Stanley and goes unheeded by Stella; a woman whose heavy make-up and costume jewelry can no longer hide her ravaged looks; a silent woman by the

end of the play who does not heed Stella's desperate cries and who "allows [the Doctor] to lead her [out of the Kowalski apartment] *as if she were blind*" (418; emphasis mine).

Williams is careful not to have the Mexican Woman appear suddenly at Blanche's door and disappear just as quickly. We hear the Mexican Woman coming in the background, we hear her calls from afar, and we hear her calls as she turns from the apartment and drifts away offstage. Since she is blind, obviously she moves slowly. The effect of the Mexican Woman's movement, combined with her calls, is haunting. It is to make us feel that Blanche is haunted by her past—by the death and desire that the Mexican Woman and her tin flowers represent—that her past can never leave her; and it is to make us feel that her past will inevitably determine, indeed has already determined, her future. The Mexican Woman, in her walk up to and on from the Kowalski apartment, seems to walk out of the past and into the future, into an oblivion that Blanche herself will soon know.

When Blanche leaves for the insane asylum, and the oblivion attending it, at the end of Scene 11, Stanley remains behind with Stella: his way of life thus appears to have won out over his sister-in-law's. But it is not that simple. Life for the Kowalskis will never be the same after Blanche's departure, and Williams provides plenty of evidence for this conclusion in the final scene of the play—evidence that, once again, has hitherto mostly been ignored by critics. If the Mexican Woman of Scene 9 is the symbol of death, desire, and the past in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, then the newborn child of Scene 11 is the play's symbol of life, maternity, and the future—for Stella, but not for the paternal Stanley.

Stella's absence from both Scene 9 and Scene 10 while she is giving birth, coupled with her reappearance onstage in Scene 11, serves to distance her in our minds from her husband and to prefigure her relationship with him beyond the perimeters of the play. That Stella does not once speak to Stanley in the last scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (even when addressed by him one time) is indicative of the essential silence that will permeate the rest of their lives together. That she comments, in the acting edition of the play, on the ache she feels when she is not in the same room with her baby (while Stanley, significantly, never refers in Scene 11 to the son he so celebrated before Blanche in Scene 10), and says nothing of having missed Stanley while she was away in the hospital (whereas in Scene 1 she had told Blanche, "I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night" [259]), is significant of the role her son will now play in providing Stella with the opportunity for self-fulfillment (however limited) implicitly denied her from the start by her husband:

STELLA. (*Above armchair, as Eunice enters, crosses around Stella to backless chair in the downstage right corner.*) How's my baby? **Is he demanding his supper?**

EUNICE. (*Putting bowl of grapes on backless chair, backing left a few steps.*) Sleepin' like a little angel. Brought you some grapes.

STELLA. (*Moving downstage at left of Eunice. Leaving slip on back of armchair.*) **Bless him. I just ache when I'm not in the same room with him.**

EUNICE. **You better leave him right there till you know what gets settled.** Where is she?

STELLA. Bathing. [Acting Edition of *Streetcar*, 95; **the acting edition's additions to the dialogue are signified in boldface in this excerpt from Scene 11.**]

It was the imminent birth of the child in Scene 8 that decided that Stanley and Stella's strained bond would be momentarily strengthened, that Stanley would prevail over Stella in his efforts to expel Blanche from his home. And, ironically, it is the child's final presence onstage that signifies the crippling of their marital bond.<sup>4</sup> It is not by chance that, as Stanley goes to placate his wife on the stairs at the end of the play, the child, whom Eunice has placed in Stella's arms, stands between them. Even as he kneels here, so too did Stanley kneel on these stairs in intimacy with Stella, his face pressed to her belly, after the disastrous "poker night" at the end of Scene 3.

The child itself, by remaining unnamed and unspoken of as someone with a psychological life of his own, by being kept offstage until after Blanche's last exit, and by being born on the same day as Blanche, comes to function as an almost pure symbol not only of all the children Stella will bear in her steady retreat from Stanley, but of the result of things, the ironic and abrupt end of his benign domination of her. It is Stanley's lust after Stella—the epitome of this domination and crux of their relationship—that frees her, finally and ironically, to direct her attentions away from him and toward the son born of his lust. The delayed introduction of the child, whose absence from the plot up to this point lends its now unique presence the urgency of allegorical simplicity, thus sets the final moments of the play off as the anticipated, yet anti-climactic, culmination of Stanley and Stella's relationship. At her birthday supper, Blanche had wished that "candles [would] glow in [Stella's baby's] life and . . . that his eyes [would] be like candles, like two blue candles lighted in a white cake!" (373-374). And now, at the hour of her spiritual death, this baby is borne onstage in a pale blue blanket, to win Stella away from Stanley, as it were, where she, Blanche, could not.

Right before Stella accepts the baby from Eunice, she yells "Blanche!



Blanche, Blanche!" as her sister "*walks on without turning, followed by the Doctor and the Matron*" (418). Earlier in Scene 11, Stella had declared to Eunice, "I couldn't believe [Blanche's] story and go on living with Stanley" (405). Blanche's story, of course, is that Stanley raped her while Stella was in the hospital giving birth, and Stella's crying out her name three times, then sobbing "*with inhuman abandon*" (419), suggests her anguish over the decision to believe Stanley's version of events instead of her sister's. In her heart, we might say, Stella knows what really happened, and that knowledge will color her behavior toward her husband for the rest of her life. What really happened is what probably had happened on a number of occasions before Stanley ever met his wife or Blanche: his forcing himself, in a drunken lust, on a woman whose resistance he regarded as dutifully affected, whose "no" he interpreted as really meaning "yes."

Such lines of Stanley's as "I never met a woman that didn't know if she was good-looking or not without being told, and some of them give themselves credit for more than they've got" (278); "[To interest me a woman would have to] lay ... her cards on the table" (279); "Oh! So you want some roughhouse!" (402); and "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!" (402)—these are the lines of a man used to having his way with the opposite sex. And this is a man whom Williams describes as follows:

*Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. . . . He sizes women up women at a glance with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them.*  
(264-265)

Stanley may even have resorted to force to get Stella, who thought he was "common" upon meeting him for the first time but who "loved it" (377), in his words, when she got pulled down from the grandiose columns of her Southern aristocratic past. In other words, just as Blanche's "intimacies with strangers" (386) after her young husband's suicide culminated in her seduction of a seventeen-year-old schoolboy and the consequent loss of her teaching post (which forced her to seek refuge with her sister in New Orleans), so too do Stanley's liberties with women culminate in his rape of Blanche and the consequent loss of his genuinely intimate relationship with Stella.

Stanley's marriage to Stella can be viewed as his attempt to "be good" and settle down, even as Blanche's courtship of Mitch can be seen as her attempt to be respectable and attract a proper husband. Stanley strays from the path of righteousness when he rapes Blanche: his incontinent past catches up with him, we might say, and in the process he returns her to her own past as a



seductress. The moral difference between Stanley and Blanche, however, is that she successfully resists the lure of her incontinent past throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*—in her dealings with Mitch, with the newsboy, and with Stanley himself, to whom she is clearly attracted early in the play and with whom she might have committed adultery were it not for her ill-fated attraction to his best friend.

I want to concentrate here on the “newsboy scene,” which comes at the end of Scene 5 and which, understandably, has received far less attention than Blanche’s romantic scenes with Mitch. It is fairly obvious that we are to see in the newsboy scene a confluence of past and present. We are reminded by Blanche’s amorous response to the Young Man of her similar response to the high-school boy in Laurel that caused her to be fired from her teaching position. And we see Blanche resist the temptation to seduce the Young Man—a reminder of her resolution to behave herself in New Orleans so that she can find a mate, find the safe harbor that has so long eluded her.

What is less obvious, what seems to me the scene’s real poignancy, is its evocation of Blanche’s own lost innocence as well as her imagination and depth of feeling—an innocence or purity suggested by her very name (the feminine form of the adjective “white” in French), which identifies her with the achromatic color white as opposed to Stanley’s primary colors (*The Primary Colors* was the title of the first draft of *Streetcar* [114, Bak]), and by her astrological sign, Virgo (for “virgin”). We may see Blanche in the negative light of seductress here, but we should also see her in a positive light, as one who recognizes her own lost innocence (not accidentally, in the figure of a young man who recalls Allan Grey) and responds to it effusively. This is one way of explaining her turning to a seventeen-year-old boy for an affair in Laurel after her many “intimacies” with men at the Hotel Flamingo: in turning to a boy, Blanche was attempting to return to her own youth when, with Allan, she “made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely” (354).

So the Young Man in Scene 5 can be looked at as a symbol of innocence, as a symbol of Blanche’s own one-time innocence that was corrupted by others—an innocence-cum-corruption that is visually recapitulated in the play by her arrival in hot and dirty New Orleans wearing “a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat” (245), and then by her appearance on the night she is raped in “a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown” (391). As Stella tells Stanley, “You didn’t know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change” (376). To underline this theme of innocence revisited in the newsboy scene, Williams has it rain before the Young Man’s entrance. The rain, like the water in

Blanche's frequent baths, becomes a cleanser, a purifier, and thus one more instance of what Leonard Quirino has called Blanche's addiction to water.<sup>5</sup>

Blanche finally lets the Young Man leave the Kowalski apartment, his innocence intact (except for a kiss), as, it could be said, she would have liked her own innocence left intact. Fittingly, Mitch appears for his date with Blanche right after the Young Man's exit. Mitch may be Blanche's hope at this point for a secure and happy future, but he will become, with the help of Stanley, another of the men who abused Blanche and caused her to relinquish her hold not only on innocence but also on sanity. At the start of the newsboy scene, there was a chance of more rain (the stage direction reads, "*There is a little glimmer of lightning about the building*" [336]), which Blanche would not have minded, since she likes the insulation and the time for reflection that the rain provides. She says to the Young Man, "Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour—but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hands . . .?" (337-338). By the end of Scene 5, however, the weather has cleared up, and the trusting Blanche goes out into it, unsuspecting, with the credulous Mitch.

Blanche ultimately loses Mitch to Stanley's thorough investigation of her "recent history" (363), but Stanley loses his best friend as well, the man with whom he served in the "Two-forty-first Engineers" (365) during World War II, and with whom he now works in the same plant and bowls on the same team. Mitch speaks to Stanley only once during Scene 11, at the start after the latter wins a poker hand and boasts of his luck, to which Mitch responds, "You . . . you . . . you. . . . Brag . . . brag . . . bull" (404). Blanche comes out of the bathroom shortly thereafter. And it is to Blanche that Mitch does his responding for the rest of the play, in the process revealing his guilt, sorrow, anger, and resentment:

*At the sound of Blanche's voice Mitch's arm supporting his cards has sagged and his gaze is dissolved into space. Stanley slaps him on the shoulder.* (407)

*[Blanche] crosses quickly to outside door. . . . The poker players stand awkwardly at the table—all except Mitch, who remains seated, looking down at the table.* (413)

*Blanche stops just inside the door. Mitch keeps staring down at his hands on the table, but the other men look at her curiously.* (414)

*Stanley pushes him aside. Mitch lunges and strikes at Stanley. Stanley pushes Mitch back. Mitch collapses at the table, sobbing.* (417)

Mitch weeps at Blanche's departure, as does Stella, who speaks for Mitch as well as for herself when she laments, "What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?" (416). Blanche is all alone at the end of

*A Streetcar Named Desire*, but, in a sense, so is Stanley, who has used force to alienate Mitch even further and whose way of comforting his distressed wife is to fondle her breasts (the stage direction reads, “*his fingers find the opening of her blouse*” [419]). Stella at least now has her baby to turn to and Mitch his sick mother; Stanley has nothing except those appetites—for sex, for violence, and for alcohol, all of which we see him indulge during Scene 11<sup>6</sup>—that will lead, finally, to his self-consumption.

Stanley’s desire has victimized him, even as Blanche’s has victimized her. Since they are mutual victims of desire, it could be said that a part of Stanley leaves the Kowalski apartment with Blanche, while a part of Blanche stays behind with Stanley. As Normand Berlin has written,

Desire or sexual impulse . . . is common to both Blanche and Stanley and provides one measure of their similarity and difference. They share other measures as well. They compete for the possession of Stella, for the affections of Mitch; they share the bottle of whisky; they dress and undress in the view of others; they both wish to occupy the bathroom. (99)

At the end of the play, Stanley may have the bathroom all to himself, but Blanche will remain the invisible barrier to his ever again achieving true intimacy with Stella and Mitch. At the end of the play, Blanche may have found temporary substitutes for Mitch and Stella in the Doctor and the Matron, but Stanley will remain the invisible barrier to her ever cleansing her mind and body of their impurities. Desire will have led, then, to a kind of living death for both Blanche and her brother-in-law.

## Notes

1. Vlasopolos’s thesis is that “the hidden determinism ultimately uncovered by Williams’s play has less to do with the history of the South as we now have it than with gender-determined exclusion from the larger historical discourse” (325). Hanks maintains that *A Streetcar Named Desire* depicts “a patriarchal social order based on a conquer-conquered, aggressor-victim, dominance-submission, subject-object, self-other dichotomy inherently inimical to woman’s selfhood” (119).
2. For a discussion of the comic aspect of Williams’ work—an aspect often neglected by critics—see Charles B. Brooks, “Williams’ Comedy,” and John M. Roderick, “From ‘Tarantula Arms’ to ‘Della Robbia Blue’: The Tennessee Williams Tragicomic Transit Authority.” See also Brooks’s “The Comic Tennessee Williams,” in which he calls Williams “an essentially comic playwright” whose “greatest power and appeal derive from a comic vision that he seems unwilling to trust fully” (275).

3. Henry Schvey argues, somewhat differently from me, that “Stella’s baby, born at approximately the same time as Blanche’s violation by Stanley in the previous scene, is associated with Blanche in the final moment of the play. . . . Williams clearly suggests an identification between the tragic fall of one and the birth of the other. [He suggests] that Blanche’s symbolic death has ultimately resulted in a new life. . . . Thus Blanche’s fall is actually part of a process that goes beyond death and hints at something like heroic transcendence, . . . [at] spiritual purification through suffering” (109). Schvey believes that this process of transcendence or purification is augmented by Blanche’s changing in the final scene from a red satin robe (406)—which she had used to flirt with Stanley in Scene 2 (276) and with Mitch in Scene 3 (297-302)—into a blue outfit. “It’s Della Robbia blue,” says Blanche, “The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures” (409), and thus a blue that associates her with both the Virgin in Renaissance art and the Kowalskis’ baby boy, whom Eunice brings onto the stage swathed in a “pale blue blanket” (418).
4. At the expense of what I believe to be convincing evidence in the play, Alan Ehrlich argues the opposite in “A Streetcar Named Desire Under the Elms: A Study of Dramatic Space in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Desire Under the Elms*” (136):

Blanche is escorted out by the doctor. Precisely *after* this action is completed, the child appears. The household was too crowded for a sister-in-law, as she is an outsider to the established order, the marriage; but for a son there is plenty of room. Blanche has overstayed her welcome but Baby Kowalski is accepted with open arms. “Eunice descends to Stella and places the child in her arms. . . . Stella accepts the child . . .” (418). The displacement is successful; the family is unified once more. . . . Williams has found the perfect gesture to reinforce the dramatic space and environment he created. The established environment, the happy marriage, could not be shaken by a sister-in-law; only a child could be incorporated into it.

5. We hear of that addiction again in both Scene 10 and Scene 11. At the start of Scene 10, Blanche fantasizes about “taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock-quarry” (391), and a little later she invents the story that Shep Huntleigh has invited her to cruise the Caribbean on a yacht. In Scene 11, Blanche looks forward to living out her life at sea: “I can smell the sea air. The rest of my time I’m going to spend on the sea. And when I die, I’m going to die on the sea. . . . And I’ll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard . . .” (410).

Quirino writes (81) that

Throughout the play, Blanche's addiction to water and to the baths . . . seems to be connected with the geography and function of the Elysian Fields [the street where Blanche gets off the trolley named Desire to find Stanley and Stella's apartment, and which "runs between the L & N tracks and *the river*" (243; emphasis Cardullo's)]. In myth, the dead who entered the Elysian Fields [Elysium, the paradise of the happy dead for the Greek poets] were made to drink of the water of the river Lethe to forget all traces of their mortal past. And in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, Vergil depicts Lethe as a kind of watery purgatory where the dead are cleansed of all taint of memory and desire before they can be considered fit for reincarnation. In his adaptation of the concept of Elysian Fields for *Streetcar*, Williams, until the very end when he allows her the refuge of madness, denies the memory-haunted Blanche the full powers of the river Lethe.

6. Evidently, the men eat and drink at the poker table in the last scene, since Eunice complains that they are "making pigs of themselves" (404), and since Williams describes the atmosphere in the kitchen, where Stanley, Pablo, Steve, and Mitch play cards, as "*the same raw, lurid one of the disastrous poker night*" (403) in Scene 3.

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## “Monologue and Metaphor in Sam Shepard’s *Curse of Starving Class*”

More than any other contemporary American playwright, Sam Shepard has woven into his own dramatic idiom the strands of a youth culture thriving on drugs, rock music, astrology, science fiction, old movies, detective stories, cowboy films, and the racing of cars, horses, and dogs. The most talented of a generation of dramatists that includes John Guare, María Irene Fornés, Megan Terry, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Rochelle Owens, and Lanford Wilson, Shepard relies heavily on “jazzy” or manic, often monologue-driven language to make his drama; he creates arresting, if not surreal, theatrical images; his characters are sometimes split, often fragmented, and always unpredictable; while his subjects tend to be non-urban. Indeed, Shepard constantly shows people living on the edge, an emotional as well as a physical one—the Western edge of the United States. In the nineteenth century, the West lured adventurers, speculators, outcasts, and pioneers and thus became the mythic place for America to reinvent itself (at the same time as such a reinvention dispossessed the Indians). In the twentieth century, Shepard evoked that elusive myth as a way of showing how desperately the people of the United States needed to find themselves again amid the consumer trash, media technology, and spiritual displacement or dislocation of suburban American society.

Called by at least one critic the “poet of the postmodern condition” (Wilcox, 570) on account of his subject matter as well as his effacement of the distinctions between high art and popular commodities such as books, dime novels, or television dramas, Shepard, as of the second decade of the twenty-first century, has written well over forty stage plays—short pieces, full-length works, and collaborative efforts in addition to a radio play, a television drama, short stories, poetry, and several film scripts. With the possible exception of David Mamet, no American playwright since Eugene O’Neill has been so prolific. And, like O’Neill, who went through an extended period of experimenting with non-realistic, even expressionist, drama before turning in his last autobiographical plays to a much more representational style, Shepard too has moved from his initial “vibrations”—his term for the early non-realistic monologues (or monological dialogue) in which he attempted to create the theatrical equivalent of improvisational jazz—to a series of semi-autobiographical, full-length works that appear, at least on the surface, to take a naturalistic view of the nuclear American family.

Shepard began writing plays just as a new movement was flourishing, financed by playwrights and actors and usually produced in non-theatrical settings (churches, cafés, even a hardware store): Off-Off Broadway. At the

Village Gate he got to know the head waiter, Ralph Cook, just as Cook was planning an Off-Off venture at St. Mark's Episcopal Church (located in New York's Bowery). Prophetically named Theatre Genesis, the new company opened its doors in 1964 with a double bill of Shepard one-acts titled *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden*. Both plays received negative reviews, but in the following years, 1965 through 1971, Sam Shepard became one of the best-known playwrights of the Off-Off Broadway subculture with such short plays as *Chicago* (1965), *Mad Dog Blues* (1965), and *Forensic and the Navigators* (1967), also produced at Theatre Genesis; *Red Cross* (1966) at Judson Poets' Theatre; *Dog* (1965), *The Rocking Chair* (1965), *The Unseen Hand* (1969), and *Shaved Splits* (1970) at Café La MaMa (later La MaMa ETC); *Icarus's Mother* (1965) at Caffè Cino; and *La Turista* (1967), *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), and *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971) at the American Place Theatre.

*La Turista* was Shepard's first full-length play, and it won him the fourth of what would ultimately amount to ten Obie Awards. Punning on the Spanish word for tourist and the diarrhea that attacks American tourists in Mexico, this satire features two virtually identical acts (like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* [1953], the first play Shepard ever read); a dysfunctional couple named Kent and Salem, after popular cigarettes; and an ending in which Kent escapes by leaping through the rear wall of the stage. Three years after *La Turista*, *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), his longest play to date, became Shepard's first venture not produced Off-Off Broadway; instead it was performed at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, where it was a critical disaster. (Another Shepard play was not produced on Broadway until the revival of *Buried Child* [1979] in 1996.) Traditional audiences were baffled by the convoluted plot that deals with what happens when an Air Force computer designed to find UFOs is disguised as a sidewinder rattlesnake and mistaken by local Hopi Indians for a snake god.

*The Tooth of Crime* (1972) is the most impressive play of Shepard's middle period, the late 1960s and early-to-mid seventies, when he extended his grasp to produce full-length works (sometimes in one longish act) employing the same kind of surreal, almost otherworldly individuality found in the one-act vibrations of his first phase. These middle plays—including *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974), *Angel City* (1976), and *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976)—are fantasies that borrow from westerns and gangster films, science fiction, cartoons, and the artist in a violent postmodern world. *The Tooth of Crime*, for example, recasts the Western shoot-out as a confrontation between the established rock star, Hoss, and the "gypsy" challenger, Crow. Combining the mythology of the West and popular music, the use of a referee and pom-pom-waving cheerleaders, Shepard drew not only on his own intermittent musical career as a drummer, but even more on his fascination with language. The

climactic duel between Hoss and Crow stands out, for it involves a variety of linguistic styles (a synthesis, in the end, of the slangs of rock-and-roll, crime, astrology, and sports) that in turn create striking physical gestures.

In 1974, as he was moving out of his middle period, Shepard began a long association with San Francisco's Magic Theatre. It was there that *Tongues* (1978) was performed by Joseph Chaikin, the founder of the Open Theater in New York. This piece, like *Savage/Love* (1979)—also performed by Chaikin at the Magic—is, in Shepard's words, "an attempt to find an equal expression between music and the actor" (Program Note, n.p.). Really librettos conceived with the intent of being set to sound and music, these two monologues comprise snatches of everyday life and express a range of familiar human experience from the pain of childbirth to the fear of death. Thus, the emotional transformations required of the actor in *Tongues* and *Savage/Love* seem both to underline a major theme of Shepard's drama and to continue the work of the Open Theater, which was noted for its acting exercises in which performers transformed themselves from one state—or one being—to another.

At the Magic Theater at least three plays from Shepard's five-play family cycle were first produced—*Buried Child* in 1978, *True West* in 1980, and *Fool for Love* in 1983—works that mark the third, "mature" phase of his dramatic writing career. Though the world of these five plays (the other two are *Curse of the Starving Class* [1976] and *A Lie of the Mind* [1985]), which are about the disintegration or dysfunction of the nuclear family, may seem more representational than the world depicted in his previous drama, certain thematic motifs as well as scenographic images link them to the wildness-and-craziness of the earlier pieces. One thinks of the magic vegetables in *Buried Child* and the absent-but-present father in *Fool for Love*, off to the side in a chair in a separate stage area, but preternaturally able to confer with the son and daughter who have conjured him up. (Such an absent-but-present patriarch, in the form of a corpse, is also to be found in *The Late Henry Moss* [2001], where two sons battle to uncover the facts of their father's death.) One remembers the two brothers in *True West*, who, as Shepard himself has said (O'Connor, n.p.), are really parts of the same person, each the alter ego of the other (a device or phenomenon the playwright was later to exploit again in *Simpatico* [1994]). And one recalls that the title of *A Lie of the Mind* derives from the protagonist's inability to separate reality from illusion, which may make him a madman but implicates us all in our preference for fantasy and feeling over rationality and realism. (In the later *States of Shock* [1991], which marked something of a return to Shepard's hallucinatory-cum-improvisational style of the 1960s, a black waitress in the end miraculously heals a maimed young war veteran wheeled around by the Colonel—a

military man who may or may not be his father.)

In this family cycle, Shepard follows O'Neill in dramatizing a tragic America mired in sin. All five plays are bound, not by a carryover of specific characters, but by the real or implied specter of the generalized "old man" or father figure, whose sins weigh heavily on the heads and hearts of his children (together with a grandson in *Buried Child*). As a result, the offspring of these patriarchs are obsessed with recapturing a vision of America and the family that may or may not have ever existed. Like Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 B.C.)—which O'Neill himself used as a model for the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931)—Shepard's series of domestic dramas thus explores the mythic themes of guilt-cum-expiation, blood pollution, regeneration or resurrection, physical as well as emotional violence, and sexual passion within the context of the family. For example, in *Curse of the Starving Class*—which I shall consider at length in the pages to follow—the father is guilty of betraying his wife and children by attempting to sell their farm to soulless speculators; and the familial curse is spiritual starvation (expressed through alcoholism, avarice, infidelity, and duplicity) in the land of material plenty.

\* \* \*

WESLEY. I was lying there on my back. I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. I could hear stock cars squealing down the street. I could feel myself in my bed in my room in this house in this town in this state in this country. I could feel this country close like it was part of my bones. I could feel the presence of all the people outside, at night, in the dark. Even sleeping people I could feel. Even all the sleeping animals. Dogs. Peacocks. Bulls. Even tractors sitting in the wetness, waiting for the sun to come up. I was looking straight up at the ceiling at all my model airplanes hanging by all their thin metal wires. Floating. Swaying very quietly like they were being blown by someone's breath. Cobwebs moving with them. Dust laying on their wings. Decals peeling off their wings. My P-39. My Messerschmitt. My Jap Zero. I could feel myself laying far below them on my bed like I was the ocean and overhead they were on reconnaissance. Scouting me. Floating. Taking pictures of the enemy. Me, the enemy. I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something undescribable. Then I heard the Packard coming up the hill. From a mile off I could tell it was the Packard by the sound of the valves. The lifters have a sound like nothing else. Then I could picture my dad driving it. Shifting unconsciously.

Downshifting into second for the last pull up the hill. I could feel the headlights closing in. Cutting through the orchard. I could see the trees being lit one after the other by the lights, then going back to black. My heart was pounding. Just from my Dad coming back. Then I heard him pull the break. Lights go off. Key's turned off. Then a long silence. Him just sitting in the car. Just sitting. I picture him just sitting. What's he doing? Just sitting. Waiting to get out. Why's he waiting to get out? He's plastered and can't move. He's plastered and doesn't want to move. He's going to sleep there all night. He's slept there before. He's woken up with dew on the hood before. Freezing headache. Teeth covered with peanuts. Then I hear the door of the Packard open. A pop of metal. Dogs barking down the road. Door slams. Feet. Paper bag being tucked under one arm. Paper bag covering "Tiger Rose". Feet coming. Feet walking toward the door. Feet stopping. Heart pounding. Sound of door not opening. Foot kicking door. Man's voice. Dad's voice. Dad calling Mom. No answer. Foot kicking. Foot kicking harder. Wood splitting. Man's voice. In the night. Foot kicking hard through door. One foot right through door. Bottle crashing. Glass breaking. Fist through door. Man cursing. Man going insane. Feet and hands tearing. Head smashing. Man yelling. Shoulder smashing. Whole body crashing. Woman screaming. Mom screaming. Mom screaming for police. Man throwing wood. Man throwing up. Mom calling cops. Dad crashing away. Back down driveway. Car door slamming. Ignition grinding. Wheels screaming. First gear grinding. Wheels screaming off down hill. Packard disappearing. Sound disappearing. No sound. No sight. Planes still hanging. Heart still pounding. No sound. Mom crying soft. Soft crying. Then no sound. Then softly crying. Then moving around through house. Then no moving. Then crying softly. Then stopping. Then, far off the freeway could be heard. (137-138)

I give this monologue of Wesley's from early in Act I in full, not because I intend to explicate it (it is fairly self-explanatory), but in order to illustrate the peculiar ability that the main characters of *Curse of the Starving Class* have to describe their experiences in highly incantatory, almost poetic language. I say "poetic," not dramatic language, because in these instances the characters are not revealing their innermost thoughts for the purpose of advancing the action in some way. They are literally talking out loud to themselves, telling stories in which they are actors or observers, and which—in the case of the tale of the eagle and the cat by Wesley's father, Weston, at the start of Act III—may have metaphorical implications for the play as a whole.

Arguably, Wesley is characterizing himself in the monologue quoted above, if not advancing the dramatic action, but I believe that the characterization would come more from the *actor's* dramatizing these words than from the words themselves. In production it is difficult to make this long speech work, precisely because it neither advances the action nor gives us much direct information about Wesley. In fact, it usurps one of the audience's traditional roles in the theater: to fill in for itself the details of an event—here, Weston's return home drunk and his breaking down the door—that has been referred to by the characters.

So what, then, are this speech and others like it doing in the play? If Wesley's monologue reveals his ability to describe his experiences in incantatory, nearly poetic language, then we must ask where this ability comes from. I think that it comes from the characters' habit of always talking to themselves, their having to do so, in a home and a world devoid of warmth or simple human fellowship. As Weston says, "Always was best at talkin' to myself. Always was the best thing. Nothing like it. Keeps ya' company at least" (192). One of the ideas suggested by the long speeches in *Curse of the Starving Class* is that the gift for language, for self-expression, may be developed in people—and especially in writers—at the expense of the gift for communion, for communicating with and loving others. On the one hand, the characters' gift for language gives us pleasure by painting appealing word-pictures for us. On the other hand, the desperateness of their social situation disconcerts us and makes us wonder if something couldn't have been done to help them.

All that the characters in *Curse of the Starving Class* seem to have left is their imagination, as expressed in words. The question that the play may pose is, is that enough? Is it sufficient for continued humane survival? Or will it lead inevitably to the kind of self-obsession that can end only in the destruction of the self and the world? Dramatic form, of course, is itself an act of communion between playwright-cum-players and the audience, and I think that a play such as *Curse* intends to keep up some warm kind of dialogue between human beings, even if it is only the silent type that takes place in the theater. I also think that *Curse*—and in this sense it is representative of Shepard's form of drama—means to warn against what I shall call the pleasure of the monologue, of its narcissism, for the potentially mesmerized spectator as well as for the characters themselves.

The following "duologue" between Wesley and his mother, Ella—which comes at the end of the play—is at least a step in the right direction, towards communion:

ELLA. . . . What happens next?



WESLEY. A cat comes.

ELLA. That's right. A big tom cat comes. Right out in the fields. And he jumps up on top of that roof to sniff around in all the entrails or whatever it was.

WESLEY. And that eagle comes down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky.

ELLA. That's right. And they fight. They fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. That cat's tearing his chest out, and the eagle's trying to drop him, but the cat won't let go because he knows if he falls he'll die.

WESLEY. And the eagle's being torn apart in midair. The eagle's trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won't let go.

ELLA. And they come crashing down to earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing. (200)

The pleasure of the monologue is the pleasure of art, the artist, and the spectator in isolation. And isolation—lack of communication—is killing us, Shepard suggests. It is no accident that in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston's story of the eagle and the cat is not completed until the end of the play (as quoted above), and at that point by two characters, not one. This story is a metaphor for the entire action of *Curse*, and it is important that two people finish telling it to each other, for its lesson is that man in isolation, not communicating with his fellow men, will inevitably destroy himself and everyone with whom he comes into contact.

The eagle and the cat both want the same thing—the lamb, or lamb testes, that Weston throws atop the shed roof (he is castrating lambs in his story)—and they kill each other trying to get it. The “eagles” and the “cats” in *Curse of the Starving Class* do the same; they want the Tate-family land, which is identified with the lamb testes of Weston's story. One clue to this is the lamb Wesley brings into the house in Act I, and which Weston returns to the house in Act III after he decides to stay on the land.

The *lamb*, brought into the house to recover from infestation by maggots, is identified with the *land*; like the lamb, the land is diseased or “cursed.” When Wesley, in his father's clothes, butchers the lamb in Act III, he symbolically enacts what his father has done over the years: borrow money and thus borrow away, or destroy, the land. Wesley says he killed the lamb because he was hungry, but there is plenty of food in the refrigerator; he wastes the lamb meat, in other words, and the thugs Emerson and Slater remind us of this when they bring the discarded lamb carcass into the house late in the play.

The “eagles” and the “cats” in *Curse of the Starving Class* more or less destroy one another in the fight over the Tate land. Weston, an “eagle” (he



was a pilot during World War II), fights against Ella, a “cat,” and both lose. (When she participates in telling the story of the eagle and the cat at the end of the play, the cat enters the picture for the first time; when Weston told the story by himself at the start of Act III, he stopped before the cat began to challenge the eagle for the lamb testes.) Weston goes off to Mexico to escape his creditors, and Ella is abandoned by the attorney Taylor and left with nothing. Taylor, the “legal eagle” (he also served in World War II), fights against Ellis, a “cat”—a “meat and blood” man by his own description who preys on unsuspecting drunks at his bar—and they both lose. Taylor himself runs off to Mexico in the end to avoid legal action for selling worthless land (the piece of desert property that Weston bought), and Ellis’s “Alibi Club” is badly damaged during a shooting spree by Emma, Wesley’s sister.

The eagle and the cat in Weston’s story are archetypal loners who kill each other by chance, since they are not natural enemies despite the fact that in this instance they are competing for the same food. Man, by contrast, is not by nature a loner or self-seeker. Ironically, Shepard gives us a family—better yet, a farming family—of loners to point this up all the more. When man attempts to go it alone or is driven to do so, the play implies, he ineluctably destroys himself and others.

The curse of the starving class—of any social class in American society, in fact—is precisely its spiritual starvation amidst plenty, its neglect of its spiritual needs for satisfaction of material ones, on account of the very existence of such plenty. Thus the catch-22 situation at the start of *Curse of the Starving Class*: the Tates are in deep financial trouble because, over the years, they have depended too much on credit to satisfy their every material need, to get their share of the American dream. And what could get them out of this trouble, or at least get them through it intact as a family, able to begin again somewhere else, is exactly what they have animalistically sacrificed in their single-minded quest for the material: spiritual communion, or honest, loving, and selfless communication with one another.

\* \* \*

One of the startling occurrences in the play seems to go beyond curse: Emma’s death in a car explosion. Shepard has made her rather unsympathetic in her last appearance onstage, and the notion that she is going forward and Wesley backwards (he asks her at one point, “How come I’m going backwards?” [198]) is quickly dispelled for us when she meets her end at the hands of Emerson and Slater. By the close of the play, the girl who at the start was learning about menstruation has grown up enough to make sexual overtures to her jailer (after her arrest for shooting the Alibi Club full of holes); who was blissfully making diagrams of a frying chicken for her 4-H

club demonstration, has learned to look behind the front that everybody presents to the world; who wanted to work as a mechanic, travel, and possibly write, has stolen her mother's money (even as the latter "stole" her frying chicken) and decided to take up a life of crime. Emma's learning experience in the play is distinctly negative, then, and, to repeat, Shepard somewhat startlingly kills her off for it.

Weston's and Ella's experiences in *Curse of the Starving Class* are negative, as well. For long periods of time they lie onstage while the action of the play continues around them. Very drunk after a night away from home, Weston falls asleep on the kitchen table in Act II; exhausted after a night spent at the jail tending to Emma, Ella falls asleep on the same kitchen table in Act III. Having a character fall asleep onstage and remain out of the way of the other characters (and perhaps out of sight, behind a screen), so as not to draw focus, is one thing; having a character fall asleep center stage and in full sight, as Shepard does, *so as* to draw focus, is quite another. The fact that shouting and arguing go on around the sleeping characters draws attention all the more to their dormant condition, since neither one awakens. Both Weston and Ella are apparently deep sleepers; either that, or Shepard is using their sleep as a metaphor to suggest something about the way in which they have conducted their lives up to the time when the play begins.

The point, actually, is less that Weston and Ella sleep through shouting and arguing than that they sleep imperviously through events that will have a major effect on their lives. While Weston is asleep, for example, Ella returns from a night out, presumably with Taylor, thinking that she has sold the Tate land right out from under her husband; then Ellis, the owner of the Alibi Club, appears with the money he agreed to pay *Weston* (still asleep) for the land, keeping that money—which would have got Weston out of debt—when he discovers that Emma has severely damaged his bar in a shooting spree designed to retaliate against him for his predatory real-estate practices. While Ella is asleep, Weston leaves for Mexico to escape his creditors and Emma steals her mother's down-payment money and her car, to begin a life of crime. (The hoodlums Emerson and Slater blow up the car, and Emma with it, because Weston has never paid for it in full.)

Weston and Ella, then, sleep through events that will have a major effect on their lives even as, Shepard suggests, they have "slept through" important events or decisions in their lives in the past. That is why they find themselves in such a lamentable position at the start of the play: their marriage is a shambles, they are in heavy debt, and each dreams of escape, Weston to Mexico and Ella to Europe. They don't communicate with each other, and neither communicates with the world. To underline the lack of communication between Weston and Ella, Shepard gives them only one

scene in which they actually speak to each other. It comes in Act III, after Wesley has gone off to take a bath; the rest of the time, they're either not in each other's presence or, as I have already indicated, if they are onstage together, one is asleep and the other is not.

Both Weston and Ella wake up from their deep sleep in what might be construed as a contrived fashion. Weston just happens to awaken at the end of Act II, after Taylor has run off, Ellis has left with the money and Wesley has chased after him, and Ella is ready to go to the police station to retrieve Emma. Ella just happens to wake up, toward the end of Act III, after Weston has left her and his children for good and Emma has fled with her mother's money. I myself don't view these awakenings as contrivance, but instead as device. That is, the awakenings of Weston and Ella, moments too late, hint at something very important: that these two have habitually "awakened" to their problems too late, and that they've awakened to their alarming situation in the play (if they can be said to have awakened to it sufficiently at all) too late.

If Emma's, Weston's, and Ella's experiences are distinctly negative, the question remains: how positive is Wesley's experience in *Curse of the Starving Class*? That Wesley does not take his eyes off the burning car once he looks out the window and sees it might tell us that he is at least perceiving the error of Emma's ways; curiously, he does not tell his newly awakened mother what he has observed and now knows. Wesley, you see, has knowledge that no one else does: of Taylor's sale of worthless desert land to his father (although it is possible Ella knows this also), of Weston's departure for Mexico; of Emma's release from jail and death in the car explosion. At the end of the play, Ella is still in the past: she thinks that she sees Weston when she wakes up (she actually sees Wesley in Weston's clothes), and she thinks that Emma has gone off on her horse (as Emma did in Act I).

Wesley corrects his mother's identification of him as Weston by saying simply, "It's me, Mom" (198), as noble an assertion of self, in its humility, as any in American drama. And he helps Ella to recall Weston's story of the eagle and the cat. It is *his father's* story, yet it is Wesley who helps his mother retell it. He stands at the window in his father's clothes, but he is not Weston, or it is possible that he will not repeat his father's errors, because he, Wesley, can admit the cat into the story. Weston could not do so at the start of Act III, because the cat destroys the eagle with which he identifies. The cat himself is killed, however, in competition with the bird over food, and Wesley seems to sense the futility of both their deaths.

For Ella, the ritualistic repetition of the eagle-and-the-cat story is a retreat into the past, almost a mindless one, since she does not even ask who butchered the lamb she is staring at onstage and why it was butchered. For Wesley,

watching Emma's burning tomb and knowing all that he knows, the eagle-and-the-cat story is a signpost that he must read and from which he can move on, to carve out a new life for himself somewhere else. In slaughtering the lamb, he has acknowledged that the land is lost, that his father has squandered it away. Indeed, Wesley has been put through an incredible experience in the play, and so have we, since we are "spies," as audience members, just as he was when he sneaked up on his father a few time and even interrogated him.

We are made to live vicariously through what Wesley does (recall his first long monologue in Act I, quoted earlier in full) in *Curse of the Starving Class*, if only because he is the character who's onstage the most. He leaves the stage solely for immediately practical reasons: to dump the wheelbarrow (Act I); to feed the sheep (Act I); in fear of his father's return drunk and angry (momentary exit, Act I); to get the \$1,500 back from Ellis that the latter agreed to pay for the Tate land (Act II, during which Wesley is otherwise onstage the whole time); and to bathe and to kill the lamb (both in Act III). Shepard identifies us with the onstage Wesley in a most striking manner when he stares out the window at the burning car with Emma inside it. There is no stage direction indicating that she dies; we presume that she does because she leaves the house with the keys to the only car left on the property—the one that explodes in flames. Nonetheless, we must see Emma's demise *through Wesley's eyes*, since he himself does not declare her death, and thus we are identified with his point of view.

Finally, Shepard more or less passes judgment on every character *except* Wesley in the play. *We* must pass or reserve judgment on him, must decide if he has truly learned anything and will succeed where his father failed: *Curse of the Starving Class* is open-ended in this sense. Wesley is the play's anchor in a sea of hoodlums (Emerson and Slater), con men (Taylor and, to a large extent, Emerson), antiseptic or impotent lawmen (Sgt. Malcolm), and dreamers (Weston and, to a degree, Emma and Ella [e.g., what was going to happen after Ella's trip to Europe? how would she have supported herself and the children?]). The parable of the play exists in this way almost outside him.

That Shepard does not judge Wesley may have something to do with his own identification with this character. Like Wesley, the playwright lived on an avocado ranch near Los Angeles when he was in his late teens. Also like Wesley, he had a father who flew missions in Italy, as well as in the Pacific, during World War II. Shepard once said the following of his life on the ranch:

I really liked being in contact with animals and the whole agricultural thing. . . . I was thinking that I wanted to be a veterinarian. And I had

chance actually to manage a sheep ranch, but I didn't take it. I wanted to do something like that, working with animals. (Chubb, 188-189)

Shepard sounds here like the Wesley who brings a lamb suffering from maggots into the kitchen of the family home, where the warmth will help it to get well. Shepard, of course, left the avocado ranch for New York in the early 1960s to become a writer. *Curse of the Starving Class* can thus be called a kind of return to his youth and a time of decision. It is as if the dramatist, in this work, is questioning his own success, his choice of careers together with his final abandonment of the land, and asking us to take part in the deliberations—if not in fact to judge him.

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## 5. THEME, THESIS, THOUGHT, OR IDEA.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “How do the given circumstances of a particular play—its geographical location, historical period, political situation, and religious system—conspire to create its meaning?”

### “Molière, *Tartuffe*, and French Neoclassical Comedy”

His genius clearly attuned to the world of comedy rather than tragedy, Molière (1622-74) became the preeminent comic playwright in the history both of French theater and world drama. Moreover, Molière’s new art of the *comédie-ballet* (akin to the earlier English court masque) integrated interludes of music and dance into the narrative framework of comic drama, to achieve a theatrical unification of the arts in a form that did not flower again until opera 125 years later and American musical comedy at the midpoint of the twentieth century.

Born in Paris, the son of a furnisher and upholsterer in the service of King Louis XIV, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (who assumed the stage name Molière, for which no certain source has ever been discovered) was brought up in comfortable bourgeois circumstances. Jean-Baptiste attended Jesuit schools, spending more than five years at the Collège de Clermont, a fashionable, Parisian secondary school where he studied the humanities, philosophy, and the classics. Then he took a law degree at Orléans in 1641 or 1642 but never practiced. It was his father’s wish that Jean-Baptiste, the eldest of six children, succeed him in his position as *tapissier et valet de chambre du roi* (“royal upholsterer”), but by 1643 the son had renounced his hereditary court position, changed his name so as not to scandalize his family, and embarked upon a theatrical career.

Molière began by joining a company of actors run by the Béjart family. They established the Illustre Théâtre, based in Paris and headed by Madeleine Béjart (1618-72), a talented actress with whom Molière was to have a long professional association and whose lover he became. The company performed on various indoor tennis courts in Paris but did not achieve great success;

in fact, the Illustre Théâtre failed so badly that Molière was temporarily imprisoned for its debts and, in 1645, the company was forced to leave Paris. They regrouped in the provinces, where, until 1658, the Béjart-and-Molière company toured the southwest, Languedoc, and the Rhône valley under all kinds of conditions. During this period he trained himself in every aspect of the theater from acting and playwriting to set construction and business management. During this time he also observed touring Italian companies and steeped himself in their extensive repertoire of comic techniques—the techniques, that is, of the *commedia dell'arte*. These included the use of stock or stereotypically exaggerated characters, slapstick routines (known as *lazzi*), plots of intrigue, and “surprise” endings of a conventional nature.

By the end of this provincial interlude, Molière had become director of the Béjart troupe, which he enlarged by acquiring some of the most accomplished actors and actresses from other road companies. Feeling sufficiently confident, after thirteen years of theatrical experience, to try their fortunes in Paris once more, he and his colleagues brought with them the customary repertory of tragedies, full-length comedies, and short, comic curtain-raisers. On October 24, 1658, in the guard room of the old Louvre, the group performed Corneille's tragedy *Nicomedes* (1651) before Louis XIV. Never very successful at presenting tragedies, the company followed the Corneille piece with a farce of Molière's own (now lost), *The Amorous Doctor*, in which the playwright himself starred. Amused by this farce, Louis granted Molière and his troupe the right to remain in Paris, where they were installed at the Théâtre du Petit-Bourbon and alternated with the *commedia dell'arte* company of Tiberio Fiorelli (who was known as Scaramouche). By 1661, Molière's company had gained control of the new Théâtre du Palais-Royal, and in 1665 his group was formally designated “The King's Company” (*Troupe du roi*) and commissioned as chief entertainers to the court of Louis XIV.

During his residency in Paris, Molière wrote approximately thirty theatrical works, some of them *comédie-ballets* for presentation to the court at Versailles, others that were purely dramatic and intended for staging in his own theater at the Palais-Royal. Molière's theatrical company, for its part, was the most influential of its day, not only producing his plays but also fostering the career of the great tragic dramatist Jean Racine. Yet even though he achieved extraordinary status at court, royal favor was not steadfast, and in 1622 Louis XIV withdrew it from Molière in favor of Jean-Baptiste Lully, the temperamental Florentine musician with whom he had collaborated on *comédie-ballets*. In addition, because Molière was also an actor, throughout his career he remained stigmatized in ways that writers like Racine and Corneille were not.

For example, following its standard practice, and perhaps because of the

religious scandal attached to such plays of his as *Tartuffe* (1664, 1667, 1669) and *Don Juan, or The Feast with the Statue* (1665), the Catholic Church refused to bury Molière in sacred ground after he died on February 17, 1673, of a lung hemorrhage at the end of his performance of the titular role in the *comédie-ballet* *The Imaginary Invalid* (the première of which at court Lully had blocked). Louis XIV intervened, but was only able to persuade the Archbishop of Paris to bury Molière in a parish cemetery—unaccompanied by any service, and at night so as to avoid scandal. Subsequent to his death, his thirty-year-old wife, Armande Béjart (either Madeleine's younger sister or her daughter, probably by the Comte de Modène but possibly by Molière himself, who married Madeleine in 1662 and by whom he had two sons who died in infancy as well as one daughter), and the actress Mademoiselle Champmeslé—herself newly defected from the rival company at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, even as Racine had deserted the Palais-Royal for the Bourgogne in 1664—established a new company, the Comédie Française.

Before Molière's time, comic drama had been polarized, on the one hand, into the restrained, literary comedy of manners developed by Corneille in the 1630s (and preferred by the aristocratic Parisian audience), and, on the other, into the sub-literary genre of popular farce. Although farce had a long tradition in France, during the early seventeenth century it was scorned by the literati and relegated to the fairgrounds. Only the improvised *commedia dell'arte* remained in favor, and in it Molière found the basis of his new comedy. Incorporating the aesthetic principle of all such farce (depending on extravagant invention and physical as opposed to verbal humor); the *commedia erudita*, which was written rather than improvised, and based on the classic Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence that Molière had seen as a schoolboy; and the neoclassical form of the five-act play written in Alexandrine verse (which he sometimes replaced with prose or *vers libre*, and whose five acts he sometimes reduced to one or three), he created an entirely new comic form that shaped the future development of French comedy. In a clear departure, moreover, from previous comedy, which had usually been placed out of doors in the manner of the ancient Romans, many of Molière's plays are set in drawing rooms. With him, the settings are meant to be a reflection of the private manners and characters depicted, and his example did much to popularize the interior setting for comic drama.

Molière is important to the history of English, as well as French, drama because he became the model of taste for seventeenth-century English royalists, many of whom, after they lost the civil war to Oliver Cromwell, lived within the French aristocratic circle in Paris. When the English monarchy was restored in 1660, these aristocrats returned to England and carried with them to the London stage a familiarity with the conventions of French

comedy that Molière had shaped—and was continuing to shape. (The subject of English royalist exiles in another country, Spain, is the partial subject of Aphra Behn's *The Rover* [two parts, 1677 and 1681]; her play exemplifies both the modifications that the British tended to make in Molière's version of the comedy of manners and their imitations of him.)

Molière's originality, then, lay in his marriage of the mimetic and the ludic in a form that simultaneously mirrored the ordinary, everyday life of seventeenth-century French society, provided a vehicle for serious social comment on the morals and manners of its citizens, and did so in a comically biting yet often farcically ludicrous way. A case in point is *Tartuffe*. From one point of view, nothing could be more serious than the exposure of a religious impostor of a kind not unknown in France at that time. But side-by-side with the formal, declamatory arguments of the *raisonneur* Cléante against imposture and immoderation are scenes of hilarious farce and witty repartee, such as the one in which Orgon hides under a table to witness Tartuffe's seduction of his wife, Elmire; or those scenes involving Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother and *doppelgänger*, who was originally played by a man in drag combining extravagant pantomime with this character's grandiloquence of speech.

Molière had once thought that the purpose of comedy was simply to entertain by making people laugh at just such scenes as those described above. But in time he came to believe that "the business of comedy [was] to . . . present, in general, all the defects of men and principally of men of our century" (First Petition to Louis XIV concerning *Tartuffe*, 1664; 403, Hochman), ostensibly for the purpose of correction. His great character studies—of the pedant, the miser, the hypochondriac, and the bluestocking; of the moral purist, the social climber, and the religious impostor—then emerged, and these types, which had always served as comic butts, began with Molière to take on new dimensions. Although they all exhibit dominant traits or are controlled by obsessions so singular as to render their behavior comically absurd, these figures are not merely stock types but instead multifaceted, realistically drawn creations whose prototypes could be observed in the society of Molière's day.

Superior though they were to the old stock characters, Molière's character studies still showed the influence of the improvised *commedia dell'arte*. Tartuffe, Harpagon, Alceste, Argan, and Pourceaugnac are really extensions of the literally masked, stylized comic archetypes of the *commedia*. In its place they inhabit the genre of "character comedy," the laughable persistence of whose individualized, inner-compelled protagonists, in their extreme attempts to dominate others or protect themselves, is similar to the fatality of compulsive passion in Racine's tragedies. Molière's characters are thus

absolute egotists who are moved primarily by their obsessive desire to force the world to recognize them, and who invent values, interests, or beliefs—generally illusory, hence the humor—to satisfy their greedy appetites. Dupes of themselves or calculating creatures toward others, such figures are ultimately prisoners of their own natures.

Molière's enemies, in fact, could not bear the pessimism represented by his comic spirit, for he implied that every human impulse can be reduced to an illusion that masks a tyrannical egotism, which meant that any value, interest, or belief considered sacrosanct could become the object of derision. With the production in 1659 of his first important comedy, *The Affected Ladies*, for instance, the playwright incurred the hostility of much of the fashionable public, whose literary preciosity he mocked. In 1662 *The School for Wives* caused a scandal and provoked violent attacks on Molière's aesthetics, ethics, and even his private life. For in this play a forty-two-year-old man, so desirous of being married yet so fearful of being cuckolded, contrives to raise a girl of six in almost monastic seclusion for thirteen years, assuming that her total ignorance of other men and her rigorous instruction in the duties of a wife will make her completely obedient to him. Then in 1665 *Don Juan*, whose titular character commits outrageous sins with total enjoyment and no concern for the consequences, was interpreted as a monstrous profession of atheism by the pious, some of whom demanded that Molière be burned at the stake.

Molière's comic "pessimism" may be best seen in the endings of his plays. Since comedy by definition and origin must have a happy ending, more precisely a uniting of lovers, Molière's comedies—with a few exceptions such as *The Misanthrope* (1666) and *George Dandin, or The Husband Defeated* (1668)—end with the vanishing of obstacles to the marriage of a likable young couple. (They are the descendants of the literally unmasked lovers from the *commedia dell'arte*, who stood in contrast to the masked figures. Thus one always seen in Molière's work the "masked" and the "unmasked," the grotesque and the real, folly and love as they oppose and counterbalance each other.) But the devices through which this is generally brought about merely point up the invincible power of illusion or self-deception. The romanesque or fortuitous endings of *The School for Wives* and *The Miser* (1668), for example, or the royal intervention in the fifth act of *Tartuffe*, show that the dénouement cannot come from the protagonists' conversions—or lack thereof. And the dénouements of *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670) and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673) are possible only because the hero is made to sink altogether into his madness, not because he is cured of it.

Only *theatrical* illusion can create an image of final happiness, then, for real illusions—cultivated by human beings by their very nature—are dead

ends. Molière did not believe that people could be disabused of them, or changed, even by the counsel of a reasonable and sensible person in the form of a friend, a relative, possibly even a servant. He consistently shows human nature being deformed by various kinds of deviant behavior, and the deviants remain much the same at the end of the plays as they were at the beginning. No better or happier world emerges at the conclusion, and the ending, however happy it may be for most of the characters, leaves untouched the basic situation that created the tensions of the play. Characters like Alceste, Tartuffe, and Harpagon simply cannot be reintegrated into their society in any harmonious way, and each of their comedies presents a different yet equally fascinating solution to the dramatic problem of resolving the unresolvable.

Furthermore, though Molière is a particularly striking example of a writer who creates darkly comic worlds in which the dilemmas are ultimately insoluble, he shows little bitterness, let alone hatefulness, toward the human condition in his plays. Indeed, he conceives his obsessed or fixated characters, like the madly possessive Arnolphe of *The School for Wives* and the blindly devoted Orgon of *Tartuffe*, in such a way that we not only laugh at them but also comprehend their pain, not only judge them but also sympathize with their plight. For at the same time that these figures are nearly monstrous—and monstrously funny—in their delusions, they are intensely human in their attachment to them. The fact that Molière performed so many of these misguided characters himself thus speaks for itself.

The fact that *Tartuffe* seemed to treat credulity and abuse of faith, not actual religion or religious belief, obviously did not speak for itself as far as Molière's Catholic contemporaries were concerned. Each might feel that his position was being parodied in this play, but it was the major Catholic lay brotherhood, *La Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement* (the Company or Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, formed in 1627 to enforce Catholic morality), that felt most wronged and most obliged to have *Tartuffe* banned. And so it was, in its original three-act version called *The Hypocrite*, which was performed for King Louis XIV at Versailles on May 12, 1664. This version has been lost, so we do not know its exact nature; we can speculate, however, that it consisted roughly of the first four acts of *Tartuffe* as they now stand, condensed into three-act form. Moreover, evidence exists that *Tartuffe* was costumed in a cassock in 1664, thus allying him directly with the clergy. *The Hypocrite* was attacked with incredible violence by a cabal unfavorable to Molière, including not only the Company of the Holy Sacrament, but also the Archbishop of Paris, Hardouin de Péréfixe, and Queen-Mother Anne of Austria (to whose daughter, Marie Thérèse, Louis XIV was married). The approval of the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal Chigi, was unavailing, and even



the king, Molière's strongest supporter, had to give way, prohibit further production, and censure the playwright despite the latter's petition on his own behalf in August of 1664.

Revised under the title *The Impostor*, with the hypocrite's name changed to Panulphe and the play's three acts extended to five, it was publicly performed on August 5, 1667, at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. (This five-act revision had been privately played for the Prince de Condé at the Chateau de Raincy, near Paris, on November 29, 1664.) The opposition—this time headed by the First President of Parliament—brought in the police, however, and the play was once again banned despite a second petition on Molière's part (delivered to Louis on a military campaign in Lille, Flanders, in August of 1667). Not until a year and a half later, on February 5, 1669—after almost five years of struggle and yet another petition to Louis XIV—was the ban on *Tartuffe* lifted and the play publicly performed in its third version, also in five acts but with a new title. Its success was immediate and, over the centuries, it has continued to be presented more frequently than any of Molière's other plays. In its final version, *Tartuffe* was published for the first time in 1669 along with a Preface. (Like the three-act version of 1664, the revision of 1667 has been lost, though we can assume from the *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur* [published anonymously on August 20, 1667] that in the second version Molière expanded Orgon's role and gullibility so as to take some of the sting out of Panulphe/Tartuffe's blasphemous behavior, in addition to turning the latter into a layman for the same purpose—all to no avail given the continued sharpness of the play's satire.) When a second edition of the third version was printed in June of 1669, Molière added his three petitions to Louis XIV after the Preface.

The religious controversy over *Tartuffe* in its day may seem like "history" to us nearly 350 years later. Yet truly how distant in fact is this controversy from a twenty-first-century world that has long seen a similar, Protestant-versus-Catholic conflict in Ireland, not to speak of the continuing politico-religious (or ethno-political) struggles in the Middle East, the Far East, and Eastern Europe? I refer not only to the play's treatment of Catholicism, but also to the historical background that produced the intensity of the reaction against it. That intensity, as well as the religious zealotry of *Tartuffe*'s two major characters, cannot be understood without an accompanying understanding of the events that preceded it in seventeenth-century France. For we must recall that, in the mid-seventeenth century, this country had just barely emerged from a period of bloody religious strife.

Persecution of Protestants—or Huguenots, as they were known in France—had begun about 1540 but did not assume major proportions until 1572, when thousands of Protestants were murdered in the Saint Bartholomew's



Day massacre. The amnesty and tolerance extended to the Huguenots in the first part of the seventeenth century, as a result of the Henri IV's 1598 Edict of Nantes, were then jeopardized by warfare during the *Fronde* from 1648 to 1653, when religious groups sided with various noblemen struggling for power against—or on the side of—Louis XIV. Specifically, this rebellion or revolt (literally, a “fronde” is a sling, as in “slingshot”) during the minority of Louis XIV consisted of the *Fronde* of the Parliament (1648-49) and the *Fronde* of the Princes (1650-53), each of which was a failed attempt to undermine the absoluteness of Louis's monarchy.

Despite the imposing façade of this monarchy, the French were imperfectly and precariously united in the mid-seventeenth century, and they were also deeply split in matters of faith after long years of war (1540-1652) between Roman Catholics and Protestants. After the failure of the *Frondes*, increasing pressure was put upon all segments of society to conform and serve a central (Catholic) government, which was being built by Cardinal Richelieu. Religion and politics were thus inextricably bound together at this time—so much so that, after putting down the rebellion of the two *Frondes* and consolidating his Catholic monarchy, Louis, together with his chief minister, Mazarin (who replaced Richelieu), proceeded to look the other way as Protestants were persecuted, suppressed, and exiled, until the king finally abandoned any pretense at allowing religious liberty and revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (see Walker).

In such an atmosphere of “spiritual correctness,” there was little room for independent thinking on the part of anyone, and the main danger to national unity was believed to lie in heresy. Heresy, moreover, could be defined as a mild and tractable view of Christian morality that benignly regarded human passions and values as one small part of God's large creation—as opposed to an austere, puritanical view of the same morality, which brutally condemned all instinct, pleasure, and worldliness (particularly the growing popularity of the stage) as evil. This latter position led in many instances to a police-state mentality, exemplified above all by the aforementioned Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, officially suppressed by the Paris Parliament in 1660 but subsequently still strong as a secret “benevolent” society. And benevolence for this company of men consisted of service in French families as lay “directors of conscience”—service that was performed, on behalf of the Brotherhood, by actual priests but that was most often given to lay brothers who otherwise had no ordained duties (Bradby & Calder, 219-220). Indeed, when Molière created *Tartuffe*, he quite possibly had in mind the case of one such layman, Charpy de Sainte-Croix, who took advantage of the faith of his patron to seduce the man's wife (Orwen, 612-613).

Yet the repulsive *Tartuffe*, for his part, is a sort of moral monster basically

alien to the ambiance of secular comedy—like his not-so-distant relative Iago, whose relationship with Othello is a tragic variation on Tartuffe's with Orgon, and who himself is related to the comic Vice figure from medieval religious dramas. (Cf. the Mosca-Volpone relationship in Jonson's *Volpone* [1606].) *Tartuffe* itself avoids tragedy—at least in the five-act revision of 1669—only through its wholly unprepared (yet subtly meaningful) *rex ex machina*. Molière seems to have set himself the following problem, then: how do I put the worst aspects of my over-pious enemies—rigorism, inhumanity, and hypocrisy—into a play and keep it comic? Part of his solution, of course—again, at least in the five-act versions of *Tartuffe*—was to focus much of the attention on Tartuffe's dupe, Orgon (or rather dupes, for Orgon's role is framed or doubled by that of his equally bullheaded mother, Madame Pernelle). In the process, however, Molière created some confusion, for his play's title no more specifies its protagonist than does the title of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1610) or *Julius Caesar* (1599).

A protagonist or main character—and this is an empirical, theatrical definition, not an academic one—is the chief bearer of the *agon* (struggle or conflict), the one to whom the most happens, as well as the one who is most changed by the action of the play. And in this play that person is not Tartuffe, who remains absolutely unchanged or unrepentant from beginning to end. The character who changes—or who, in any event, changes his view of Tartuffe, his antagonist—is Orgon, the husband who brings Tartuffe into his house to prick and monitor its Catholic conscience. Orgon is so far deceived by this religious impostor (*not* a priest or even a lay brother, but rather someone posing as the latter, and someone who has performed other swindles as well during his criminal career) that he almost ruins self and family. But he is finally undeceived by that family who, themselves undeceived from the start, have not had to undergo a change in perception. To repeat: the experience of *Tartuffe* is Orgon's.

The major dramatic question, for most of that experience, is “Why does Orgon worship, flatter, and bribe Tartuffe so?” Why does this Parisian bourgeois force his family to accept the presence, and irritant, of the supposedly pious Tartuffe in their midst? Furthermore, why does Orgon go as far—despite the protestations of his sensible brother-in-law, Cléante; his impetuous son, Damis (as immoderate, from a reverse angle, as his father); his outspoken servant, Dorine; and his loyal wife, Elmire—as to promise his daughter Mariane (who is in love with a young man named Valère) in marriage to Tartuffe, as a way of making the latter a permanent member of his family and of engineering the fate of one of his children? Even further, why does this father then banish his son and turn over the whole of his estate to his houseguest, despite mounting evidence that Tartuffe is no more than

a sensual parasite? There are some obvious, and not-so-obvious, answers to these questions.

The obvious answer is that Orgon, an aging man with a domineering mother, grown children, and a younger (second) wife, is seeking a way to preserve control in his household. According to this interpretation, he is obsessed less with piety than with the desire to achieve a kind of absolute power and total autonomy in the realm of his home. The instrument of Orgon's will or desire, of course, is Tartuffe, but the ludicrous irony here is that, insofar as Tartuffe is invested with superior authority and complete independence by Orgon, the latter sacrifices his own sovereignty. Connected with this answer to the play's major dramatic question is the one of heterosexuality, according to which Orgon has the panic of middle age in relation to a younger wife, needs a reason to reject worldliness (read "sex"), and finds that reason in Tartuffe. When Orgon's wife finally proves Tartuffe's lechery and opens her husband's eyes, she is really proving her love for her husband and erasing his doubts about his maleness.

But, from another point of view, Tartuffe, in attempting to seduce Elmire, is rejecting Orgon—in other words, he is renouncing a homosexual relationship, or the possibility of one, with his patron. This interpretation of their dealings helps to explain, for example, why the husband waits so long to stop Tartuffe's near-rape of his wife: Orgon's reaction shows less of an angry interruption of what Tartuffe is doing to Elmire than a shocked contemplation of what this impostor is doing to Orgon himself. Moreover, this interpretation of Tartuffe and Orgon's relationship was dramatized in 1962 by the French director Roger Planchon, who argued that, in his actions toward Tartuffe, "Orgon is not stupid, but profoundly homosexual. It's obvious that he doesn't know it—the play would fall apart if he were conscious of it, if he simply tried to sleep with Tartuffe" (193). Molière could conceivably have envisioned Orgon as a latent homosexual of whose tendency Tartuffe takes advantage, for homosexuality certainly existed in the court circles of seventeenth-century France. In fact, the man who brought the playwright and his troupe to the attention of Louis XIV was one "Monsieur" (Philippe I, Duke of Orléans), the king's younger—and gay—brother, whose wife became Louis's mistress without strong registrations of protest from Monsieur (see Barker; see also Merrick & Ragan). Nonetheless, homosexuality, latent or otherwise, is far from the only explanation for the close attachment between Orgon and Tartuffe.

Yet another interpretation of that attachment—and by no means one that excludes the others—is related to the historical context I supplied earlier. Surprising, this interpretation has escaped critics, although all of them duly note Tartuffe's two references to the *Fronde*, in which Orgon "played an able

part / And served his king with wise and loyal heart" (I.ii; 17). I would argue that, subsequent to the *Fronde*, Orgon continued to serve Louis XIV "with wise and loyal heart" both by installing what he believes to be a genuine "director of conscience" in his home, in order to ensure its conformity to Catholic doctrine and thus avoid the charge of Protestant heresy, Huguenot infidelity, or religious incorrectness, and by mimicking the king's political absolutism with a kind of domestic absolutism, in which Orgon plays the role of a comic, bourgeois Louis with the purportedly pious Tartuffe as his chief minister (fittingly, Richelieu himself was a prelate and Mazarin a cardinal). The latter analogy helps to explain Orgon's disloyal harboring of secret documents belonging to a political fugitive named Argas; in so behaving, this *père de famille* not only uncharacteristically betrayed Louis XIV, but he also arrogated unto himself a power or authority reserved exclusively for the "Sun King." Louis beneficently reclaims that authority at the end of the play, of course, both by seeing through the impostor Tartuffe (to whom Orgon had entrusted Argas's papers) and by pardoning Orgon for his grave offense in aiding an exiled enemy of the crown.

This conclusion satisfies our sense of justice and restores order, for Tartuffe has been arrested and judged; Orgon and Madame Pernelle have had their eyes opened to his depravity, while the family has had its property and wealth returned; Mariane will be allowed to marry the man of her choice (as will Damis, whose marriage to Valère's sister depended on Mariane's to Valère); and the king's power has been reasserted as well as reacknowledged. Comic action in general shows the social disorder created by one or more eccentric characters who deviate from such reasonable values as moderation, sensibility, tolerance, and flexibility, as well as social intelligence and good nature. Comic action also is seen as finally affirming the well-being of society (the smaller society of family as well as the larger one of state) against the havoc wrought by unnatural behavior. Surely, then, *Tartuffe* qualifies as a (neo)classical comedy. But here as elsewhere in Molière's work, as I have indicated, the perpetrators of havoc themselves do not share in society's reformation, and the ostensibly arbitrary or contrived device of royal intervention only underscores their intractability. In other words, Orgon is still the same Orgon at the end of the play as he was at the beginning: a *père de famille* who would be *roi*.

Tartuffe, of course, is incorrigible and, despite his unmasking by the crafty Elmire and the witty Dorine, despite the fact that he cannot fool either Cléante or Damis, no one but the king can outmaneuver him. Like Iago, he is onstage but silently defiant (and prison-bound) during the final minutes of the play. Orgon is there, too, but he has learned only that Tartuffe *deceived* him. He has failed to learn the Renaissance lesson of moderation, to understand

the difference between imposture or hypocrisy and genuine piety. Indeed, he vacillates between absurd extremes, as his following declaration to Cléante makes clear: “Enough, by God! I’m through with pious men: / Henceforth I’ll hate the whole false brotherhood, / And persecute them worse than Satan could” (V.i; 185). Moreover, there is no indication in the end that Orgon has mitigated his worship of—and desire for—absolute power; he has merely transferred his worship and emulation from the false idol of Tartuffe to the true one of Louis XIV.

Thus Molière’s *rex ex machina* is not so clumsy a compliment to the king as it may seem; indeed, this device is a sly dig at the human folly that makes idol-worship of any kind necessary. Worship of kings may be better than that of impostors, but both phenomena are disturbingly similar: even as the absolute superiority of the *roi soleil* with respect to the noblemen of his realm was sustained in mid-to-late-seventeenth-century France by the vanities of those noblemen as well as their rivalries, so too is the supreme position of Tartuffe in Molière’s play sustained by the vanity of both Orgon and his garrulous mother, as well as by Madame Pernelle’s hidden rivalry with her obstinate son for domination of his family. Worship of kings, in addition, may not be so different from the worship of gods. It was Louis, after all, who proclaimed (like England’s James I before him) the divine right of kings, and Molière’s *rex ex machina* is directly derived from the *deus ex machina* of ancient Greek as well as contemporary Racinian tragedy. Ironically, the clerical critics even of the final, 1669 revision of *Tartuffe* may therefore have been correct in their insistence that Molière was not merely attacking the misuse of faith, but also—and chiefly—mocking faith itself with a shrewdness that was downright diabolical.

So *Tartuffe* is very much a play of this world, a comedy that satirizes religious imposture if not religion itself, at the same time as it ridicules false idol-worship if not the very idea of worshipping an idol. The first of Molière’s comedies to focus on a household and to explore the destabilizing effects of an obsession on tranquil domesticity, *Tartuffe* also illustrates—perhaps better than any of its author’s other plays, in part because of its very subject matter—the differences between medieval religious drama and secular Renaissance drama. As a result of the Protestant Reformation and the civil wars, political realignments, and spiritual controversies it caused, the production of medieval religious plays (then at the height of their popularity) came to be viewed as a provocation and was therefore abandoned by law almost everywhere in Europe, except Spain, by 1600. This prohibition led to several important cultural changes, two of which are most pertinent to my argument here.

First, dramatists were forced to turn to secular subjects. In doing so, they

took advantage of the revived interest in classical Greek and Roman drama to create what we now know as neoclassicism, which evinced a renewed appreciation of dramatic form. In contrast to the episodic or extensive, “formless” mysteries and moralities of the Middle Ages, climactic or intensive plays like *Tartuffe* observed the (purportedly) Aristotelian unities of time, action, and place and were divided into five acts, which Horace had required in imitation of the five quantitative parts of Roman rhetoric (*exordium*, *narratio*, *confirmatio*, *refutatio*, and *peroration*). Second, the main function of the content of neoclassical drama became, like that of rhetoric, to teach as well as to please. Medieval drama had also had a didactic ideal, but it was premised on the Bible and the lives of saints, whereas Renaissance drama found it necessary to justify the writing-cum-production of plays at a time when learning was moving away from purely theological concerns and the theater was (once again) thought to be morally unedifying. For this reason, Renaissance humanists attempted to depict drama as a socially useful tool—and so did Molière. Even though his plays themselves reveal main characters who remain engrossed in their obsessions, who can achieve no recognition or perception and reversal of their flaws, the playwright felt compelled to maintain, in the Preface to the 1669 *Tartuffe*, for one instance, that “the theatre’s great virtue is its ability to correct vices. . . . [N]othing reforms the majority of men better than the portrayal of their faults” (252, Dukore).

What, then did the new or reborn drama teach its audience in contrast with the old and now prohibited one? Comedy, French as well as Italian neoclassical theorists declared, taught by ridiculing behavior that should be avoided, while tragedy instructed by showing the horrifying results of mistakes and misdeeds. But, again, so too did medieval religious drama do this through its divine comedy, which naturally did not preclude the depiction of horrifying acts in this life. The difference between the two forms lay in their view of human nature and human conduct, a view that became more relative and flexible during the Renaissance, more Hellenic rather than Hebraic. Instead of regarding human character and behavior in absolute terms of right and wrong, vice and virtue, bad deeds and good—like the religious drama of the Middle Ages—the drama of the Renaissance championed decorum. It tried to answer the question, “How should a human being behave relative to a certain situation?” and sought to create a concordance or interdependence between that situation and the mode of behavior appropriate to it.

The answers came, not automatically from an increasingly distant God or an irrelevant God’s law, with its contrast between the extremes or excesses of beastliness, on the one hand, and of angelicism, on the other, but rather from the careful study and deliberation of a normative character like Cléante, who urges Orgon to “follow nature” and “Reason’s laws” (I.v;



33) instead of “Recklessly [pursuing] his inclination / Beyond the narrow bounds of moderation” (I.v; 33). The middle road was necessary, naturally, because mistakes could be made, as Cléante again points out to Orgon in Act V, Scene i:

Be cautious in bestowing admiration,  
And cultivate a sober moderation.  
Don’t humor fraud, but also don’t asperse  
True piety; the latter fault is worse,  
And it is best to err, if err one must,  
As you have done, upon the side of trust. (187)

A certain degree of trust in others, of course, is indispensable in any human relations. It was relatively easier, however, to have and maintain this trust as long as there was little or no separation in people’s minds between formal and substantial relations, as long as the name and the thing—the mask and the face, the word and the deed, seeming and being—were held to be indissolubly bound in a single unity. No one suspected in the Middle Ages, for instance, that a host or a guest would act otherwise than as the names host and guest implied. Even by the Renaissance this situation had changed. The schism between names and things had doubtless always been present to some degree, but it was becoming characteristic of larger and larger areas of thought and behavior—as shown by the frequent recurrence of the very terms mask and face, word and deed, in *Tartuffe*. The fact that, only sixty-five years earlier, no character saw through—or detected the schism between surface and essence in—the absolutely villainous Iago in *Othello* (1602-03) until it was too late, yet that everyone except Orgon and his mother can see through (but do nothing to stop) the evil Tartuffe from the start, ought to tell us how far Molière’s comedy had moved from the medieval view of human congruence to the modern view of subtextual dissonance we still maintain today.

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## “The Farceur as Modernist: Fernand Crommelynck, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, and Twentieth-Century Western Drama”

The international reputation of Fernand Crommelynck (1886-1970) was established in 1922 when Meyerhold directed his most important—and subsequently most popular—play, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (*Le Cocu magnifique*), in Moscow. Though Crommelynck’s reputation has mysteriously suffered since then (one finds only brief mention of him in the standard theater history texts or dramatic literature anthologies, perhaps with nothing save a photograph of the set design from the 1922 Meyerhold production), this Belgian author’s other major plays include *The Merchant of Regrets* (*Le Marchand de regrets*), *The Sculptor of Masks* (*Le Sculpteur des masques*), *The Childish Lovers* (*Les Amants puérils*), *Golden Guts* (*Tripes d’or*), *Carine, or the Young Woman Who Was Crazy about Her Soul* (*Carine ou la Jeune fille folle de son âme*), *A Small-Hearted Woman* (*Une Femme qu’a le coeur trop petit*), and *Hot and Cold, or Mr. Dom’s Idea* (*Chaud et Froid ou L’idée de Monsieur Dom*), all written and published between around 1910 and the mid-1930s.

Torn between the extremes of laughter and sorrow, frequently violent and visionary, Crommelynck’s work is typically Flemish (though written in French), not least in its preoccupation with sin. Pain is always present in his plays, the pain felt by characters living in a world where happiness, often a reality at the outset, is quickly destroyed by irrationalism, self-deception, and obsession. As in the works of his compatriot Michel de Ghelderode, the process of destruction may be farcical but the outcome never is. Crommelynck’s plays humorously show us how human behavior can be dominated and even detennined to a catastrophic end by extreme expressions of emotion or desire. The mixture of buffoonery and tragedy characteristic of Crommelynck’s theater extends to his prose style, which presents the most outrageous or gross situations in a language of beautifully sensuous imagery.

Farce with tragic overtones and drama depicting human folly, then, typify the *oeuvre* of Fernand Crommelynck. He encountered early twentieth-century drama through his father and uncle, both actors, and regarded it disapprovingly. Crommelynck felt that the characters he saw spoke endlessly, and he set out to create plays in which dramatic action would supersede exposition, where characterization and situation would go beyond the limitations of realism, and where speech and silence would be of equal value. In Crommelynck’s theater, humor and a *poetic* command of language prevail

over all other dramatic techniques to create a fusion of the serious and the comic so appropriate to his—and our own—tortured, confused, relativistic age.

Although Crommelynck himself calls some of his plays farces, others dramas, and still others simply plays, these distinctions are in the end arbitrary. Indeed, in the case of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1920), the author specifically declared that the work may be done as either a farce or a tragedy. The ambiguity of Crommelynck's theater is probably traceable to the ambivalence of his artistic roots. While he early displayed a strong predilection for the heavy, almost plodding type of farce usually associated with the Flemish stage, as a young man he was also influenced by the fashionable literary movement of the time, symbolism, with all its tragic undercurrents. Influences of expressionism (Lilar: 55-56; Knapp, 1976-77: 314) as well as symbolism (Knapp, 1978: 24-26; Moulin: 43-46) have been noted in Crommelynck's work, but in his major plays he is a fascinatingly fierce dramatic poet who defies classification.

From the repertoire of Crommelynck's plays the following six have attracted the greatest amount of attention and analysis: *The Sculptor of Masks* (1908), where the life and work of a maritally unfaithful but uniquely gifted artist are not tolerated by the general community; *Golden Guts* (1925), where a miser decides that the best way to retain his fortune is to ingest it, even if this action leads ultimately to his death; *Carine, or the Young Woman Who Was Crazy about Her Soul* (1930), in which the purist attitudes of a young woman lead to disastrous consequences; *A Small-Hearted Woman* (1934), where the tortuous constraints of excessive virtue imprison an entire household; *Hot and Cold, or Mr. Dom's Idea* (1936), where the outrage and humiliation of adultery on the part of both spouses are succeeded by obsession with, and eventual submission to, the idea if not the reality of love; and, of course, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, in which the idealization of love leads to ridicule and estrangement for the titular character. In addition to these six plays and the other two cited above (*The Merchant of Regrets* [1913] and *The Childish Lovers* [1921]), Crommelynck also wrote the charming comedy *We Won't Go to the Woods Anymore* (*Nous n'irons plus au bois*, 1906); *The Road of Conquests* (*Le Chemin des conquêtes*, 1907), a short play in verse; *Every Man for Himself* (*Chacun pour soi*, 1906), another short play; his own version of Pirandello's three-act comedy *As Well as Before, Better than Before* (*Comme avant, mieux qu'avant*, 1926); and *The Knight of the Moon, or Sir John Falstaff* (*Le Chevalier de la lune ou Sir John Falstaff*, 1954), an adaptation of the Falstaff episodes from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Parts I and II*.

Each of Crommelynck's original plays is carefully constructed. He typically starts out from a realistic situation, then introduces a twist in the

psyche of the main character that launches the rest of the action, with the realistic soon being overtaken by the obsessional and finally the absurd. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, a suspected glimmer of lust in Petrus's eye suffices to incite Bruno's jealousy and to subjugate the other figures in the play to his expression of folly. Masks are an integral part of Crommelynck's theater in that they establish its sense of the grotesque, of the ludicrously strange or ridiculously incongruous. Whether real or illusory, they create an atmosphere that is carnivalesque, and the effect of this atmosphere—in combination with the plays' comic-pathetic, indeed tragifarcical situations—is at once sublimely pleasurable and grimly menacing. Fernand Crommelynck surely ranks, then, among such significant dramatists of the twentieth century as Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, and his own countryman Ghelderode, all of whom considered this Belgian writer their peer but whose estimation has largely—and mysteriously—gone unheeded for many years.

In his early plays Crommelynck was already exhibiting an uncanny feel for dramatic form, for theatrical expression, which he would develop during his association with the Théâtre Volant ("Flying Theater"), a traveling theater that he founded in October 1916 together with his wife and some friends. Crommelynck's mastery of the theatrical idiom, like Ibsen's, was to be the direct consequence of his practical experience on the stage. For about two seasons the company put on classics, musical or poetic spectacles, children's plays, and, of course, Crommelynck's own works, which found their ideal testing ground. The experience came to an end in 1917, however, as a result of huge financial losses incurred by the company's habit of giving free performances in Brussels during the lean years of the First World War—performances that simultaneously contributed to the playwright's growing popularity. In 1925 Crommelynck would revive his fond memory of this short-lived experience in *Golden Guts*, whose second act contains the tragicomic portrait of the director of a bankrupt traveling theater. And it was during his years with the Théâtre Volant that Crommelynck began to think about a new full-length play that would precede *Golden Guts: The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

Crommelynck wrote *The Magnanimous Cuckold* from March to August of 1920, and on 18 December of the same year, the play opened to a full house at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris under the direction of Lugné-Poë, who also performed the leading role. The audience, which had barely been aware of Crommelynck's existence on the eve of the première, had come to the theater for all the wrong reasons. The title of the play was particularly misleading in this regard: the word *cuckold* suggested a "boulevard" farce, a light comedy of badinage, in which the character of the cuckold is often central. Moreover, European theaters tend to cater to their audiences during

the Christmas season by putting on musicals or innocuous comedies, and *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was decidedly not innocuous. During the first few minutes, consequently, the spectators were in a state of shock, but they recovered sufficiently to burst out in applause at the end of the first act and to rise for a standing ovation at the end of the performance.

By the next day, Crommelynck was the talk of the town. At first a Parisian *succès de scandale*, not only because of its audacious theme—a jealousy so extreme that it drives a man to prostitute his wife in order to gain absolute certainty of her infidelity—but also because it upset most of the theatrical conventions of the time, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* soon conquered the hearts and minds of theatergoers throughout Europe. The play went on to have a long international career that included productions in Buenos Aires, the Belgian Congo, and especially the countries of Eastern Europe. Meyerhold's 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* at the Actors' Theater in Moscow is still the subject of numerous studies, for it demonstrated that constructivist design (with its revolutionary non-representationalism and functionalism, in which assorted mechanical objects are combined into abstract, mobile structural forms) combined with a biomechanical approach to acting (in its anti-naturalistic, even behaviorist assumption that emotional response or expression is the consequence, not the cause, of physical activity) is ideally as well as ideologically suited to the production of such a mechanistic dramatic form as farce.

The commotion caused by *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in Paris is comparable to that caused by the premières in the French capital of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1923, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1953. The scandal derives from the fact that Crommelynck, like Strindberg or Wedekind, strips his characters of their surface conformity and in the process reveals their innermost demons, their rawest impulses, their secret desires. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was quickly translated into most European languages, with the only threat to its success being occasional censorship, as in Italy in 1922 or Great Britain in 1932—less for the protagonist Bruno's baring of one of his wife's breasts in Act I than for the provocative subject matter. The greatest directors of the time—Lugné-Poë, Meyerhold, Hébertot, Barrault, Blin—wanted to stage the play, and the greatest actors—the filmmaker Jean Renoir among them—wanted to perform its challenging leading role.

On the basis of this play, the English critic Ashley Dukes, in his book *The Youngest Drama*, did not hesitate to rank Crommelynck among the most important dramatists of the first half of the twentieth century, who included Pirandello, O'Neill, and Shaw (85-90). As cited in Jeanine Moulin's *Fernand Crommelynck ou le théâtre du paroxysme* (97), Shaw himself declared that



he preferred *The Magnanimous Cuckold* to *Othello* (1602-03) because of its original treatment of the theme of jealousy; and he might have added that he preferred it as well to Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1601-02), *Othello*'s comic opposite in which Falstaff plays the role of a would-be, money-grubbing cuckold. In *Les Livres de ma vie*, Henry Miller, who met Crommelynck in 1939, for his part ranked the play among the works that had made the deepest impression on him (366).

Incited by *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the success of Crommelynck was so great by the early 1930s that many theaters throughout the world opened with one of his plays in the hope that it would set the pace for the rest of the season. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* has even inspired such artists as Anouilh (in *Invitation to the Chateau* [1947], for example), Cocteau, and Picasso. In his 1935 memoirs, Cocteau wrote that the influence was mutual: "Crommelynck has written a theater adaptation of *Les Enfants terribles* that was to be put on by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre but in fact was never produced" (107-108; my trans.) Picasso created about fifty engravings on the subject of this play and *Golden Guts*, twelve of which were published by Crommelynck's sons Aldo, Milan, and Pietro in the 1968 edition of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. García Lorca's *Don Perlimplín* (1928) itself has echoes of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, as the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén Álvarez pointed out in his preface to the complete edition of Lorca's work (cited by Féal-Deibe).

The reason for the instant and lasting success of this play, aside from its sheer quality, is easy to determine. "After the First World War," Suzanne Lilar explains in her book *Soixante ans de théâtre belge*,

the European theater was undergoing a crisis. It had become synonymous with entertainment at all costs for an audience that had been deeply shaken by the war experience and that simply wanted to get away from it all. A widespread decline of the state theaters ensued, and all those who loved the theater feared for its very existence. More than ever before the need for a renewal was felt. The lessons of symbolism had been forgotten. A new formula was needed that would bring together the playwrights, the directors, and the audience. It was to be provided by expressionism. To tell the truth, expressionism brought a lasting renewal chiefly in stage design. For the rest, it departed from psychological theater by solving conflicts not on an individual or "accidental" level, but rather on the general, collective level of human nature. . . . The expressionistic formula was like all other formulas: men of genius used it to transcend it. Fernand Crommelynck was one of these men, whose characters go far beyond the anecdotal. (55-56; my trans.)



Despite the fact that, as he explained in a 1953 radio interview, Crommelynck conceived of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* as “a fragmentation of one character’s inner monologue into an outer dialogue that expresses by means of secondary characters the various facets of the protagonist’s mind and emotion” (my trans.), this playwright’s art is far too rich to be encompassed under or reduced to the label of expressionism. Lilar herself indicates as much, and Jean Duvignaud echoes her in his preface to the 1987 French-language edition of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*: “Crommelynck’s characters grimace like Kokoschka’s clowns, but it would be too simple to speak of them as expressionistic” (10; my trans.).

In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Fernand Crommelynck decided to revive the archetypal dramatic figure of the cuckold despite the disapproval of his friends and relatives, whose opinions he frequently sought. They felt that, after Shakespeare, Jonson, Molière, and Wycherley, the theme of jealousy could no longer be treated in an original way in either comedy or tragedy. Yet the result of Crommelynck’s initiative was surprising, for Bruno of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is no ordinary cuckold. The play presents us with a radical departure from tradition, a reversal of pattern that affects not only its protagonist’s characterization, but also its dramatic structure. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is a dark comedy that ruthlessly depicts the progressive deterioration of a man’s behavior and its effect on his environment. The play goes beyond what Shaw called “unpleasant theatre” to display monstrous humor, random ferocity, and boundless despair.

Bruno, a public scribe, has not always been a cuckold. On the contrary, as the first act develops, he appears to be enjoying an idyllic relationship with his wife, Stella. They live in a former windmill, a seemingly paradisiacal dwelling, which has been renovated to accommodate them. Stella is a delightful young woman who cannot bear the thought of being separated from her husband; Bruno is so proud of his wife that he praises her beauty and charm to everybody. He even shows one of her breasts to their friend Petrus, who is a guest in their home. The crisis comes when Bruno thinks he notices his friend taking some pleasure in the spectacle being offered to him, at which point he gives Petrus a hard slap in the face and turns him out of doors. From then on Bruno’s jealousy rages out of control, gnawing at his soul until it leaves him a ruined and empty old man at the conclusion of the play. His extraordinary jealousy is the response of an extraordinary man, one who, in the words of Ashley Dukes in *The Youngest Drama*, not only dwells in a windmill, but also

is composer-in-chief of love-letters to an illiterate peasantry, who pay him twenty sous apiece for his effusions. He is adviser-in-chief to the

Mayor in delicate questions of public policy. He is the chief character of the countryside; his doings are the talk of every fair. He is a well of jocundity, a fountain of high spirits, a volcano of human nature in active eruption. When such a man doubts the honor of his wife, the affair is portentous. (87-88)

In contrast, however, to Molière's Arnolph, who tries to prevent Agnes's infidelity in *The School for Wives* (1662), Bruno invites all the men in the village to sleep with his wife and thus becomes the instrument of his own doom. The best English translation for the title, then—rather than *The Magnificent Cuckold*, the title under which the play was originally published in English—would be *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, which does indeed appear here and there in books and encyclopedias. (The Russian translation “velikodushny” for “magnifique,” used by Meyerhold, contains this sense of magnanimity or perverse generosity.) In order not to doubt your fidelity any longer,” Bruno declares to Stella, “let me be certain of your infidelity. . . . Since your silence only increases my doubts, this is how I will prove your unworthiness. So, today, under my roof, you will betray me, in my presence” (58, from the Goris trans., as are all subsequent quotations from the play in English). Unlike Pinchwife in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, (1675), Bruno makes no attempt to hide his wife from the prying eyes of the world but rather, to our surprise, deliberately exposes her to the covetousness of his fellow male citizens. At the start of Act II, when Stella appears onstage dressed in a hooded black cloak with her face covered by a grotesque mask, Bruno begins by ordering his wife to take off the mask, thus defeating our expectations of another Pinchwife-Margery or Arnolph-Agnes relationship: “You must have been hot under that mask. Let me at least wipe your forehead, my ill-beloved. That mask is what inflames my fury. You are never going to wear it again . . . Oh, if people want to admire and covet you, all the better!” (48).

Whereas every move their wives make inevitably arouses Pinchwife's and Arnolph's suspicion, hard evidence of Stella's infidelity—indeed, promiscuity—only results in Bruno's repeated, and increasingly absurd, denial of the obvious, despite his painful craving for certitude. “Tell me something you can't tell me,” he begs her (35). Even Stella's lovemaking with Petrus in the conjugal bed and her final departure with a Cowhand are not sufficient to convince Bruno that he is a cuckold, or rather has become one by his own hand. Only out of love for Bruno, let it be said, does his wife paradoxically agree to betray him. It is the intensity and purity of her love, in fact, that save her from being tainted by the sordidness of the situation; as soon as she realizes that she has fallen out of love because of the insanity of her husband's sadomasochistic obsession, she leaves him. As Stella disappears with the Cowhand, a kind of elemental, though exaggerated, Dionysian figure, Bruno

can only guffaw and say, “Oh, no, no, I’m not that stupid! . . . That’s again one of her tricks. You’ll not deceive me anymore” (101).

Crommelynck’s departure from the archetypal model of the cuckold is immediately discernible in the physical appearance of Bruno, who is the exact antithesis of Pinchwife and Arnolph. The latter two are ridiculous old men who want to possess much younger women with no interest in them, while the former is a handsome young gentleman who enjoys a seemingly harmonious relationship with a beautiful and equally young wife who idolizes him. Arnolph and Pinchwife do not love Agnes and Margery, whom they consider only as their exclusive private property; Bruno, by contrast, genuinely loves Stella, but his obsessive and ludicrous jealousy triggers in this husband ambivalence toward his wife that slowly destroys him. Bruno’s physical and spiritual decay, which turns him by the end into a balding, broken old man, parallels the symbolic movement of time in the play: Act I takes place in the middle of spring, Act II during the summer, and Act III in the autumn. This movement reverses the seasonal symbolism of carnival, a reversal that is customary in Crommelynck’s plays, almost all of which end with the triumph of winter and death.

Arnolph and Pinchwife do not undergo a transformation like Bruno’s, since they are not wholly aware of their jealousy, whereas he has painful flashes of recognition. Although his behavior is, of course, highly ridiculous, we do not laugh at Bruno as heartily as we do at Pinchwife and Arnolph. As Francis Ambrière explained in the magazine *Clartés* in January of 1946, “Jealousy in an old man is comical; in a handsome young man, it is somewhat disquieting and painful” (my trans.). As the curtain falls, we are left with the dark picture of a world shattered by the fury of one man’s monomaniacal vice: Bruno and Stella’s love has died, Bruno has become senile if not insane, and Stella, whose promiscuity has disturbed the village’s tranquility by causing many men to betray their wives, leaves for good with the Cowhand.

Many reviewers in Crommelynck’s day—men such as Léon Moussinac in *Théâtre et Comoedia Illustré* (September 10, 1924), René Trintzius in *Le Journal du Peuple* (January 5, 1921), and René Delange in *Le Journal Littéraire* (February 1, 1925)—simply dismissed Bruno as an extreme, pathological case. Such recent critics as Gisèle Féal, Carlos Féal-Deibe, Sylvie Debévec-Henning, Heinrich Racker, Daniel Laroche, and Bettina Knapp have conducted thorough psychoanalytical examinations of Bruno in which they expatiate on this character’s “anal-erotic” tendencies. Yet the psychoanalytical approach, no matter how scientific, proves unsatisfactory in this instance, for it treats a fictitious character who inhabits a self-contained work of art as if he were a human being living in the real world. Theatrical characters are not human beings, however, even though they may exhibit mankind’s most characteristic

failings. Bruno is a protagonist who operates according to the peculiar logic of his respective play, who exists solely within the design of his dramatic universe—a design that is distinctly humoural. No critic, however, has yet realized the extensive use Crommelynck makes in this work, as the ground for his own dramatic creation, of the humours-based, Jonsonian vein of playwriting dating from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—a vein that I shall now briefly explicate before returning to a discussion of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

As D. Heyward Bock points out in *A Ben Jonson Companion*, “although Chapman’s *An Humourous Day’s Mirth* (1597) was the first humours play, Jonson was the first playwright to develop a theory of comedy derived from the theory of humours and to use humours characters to portray various types of irrational and immoral behavior” (129). Or, as John Enck puts it in his *Jonson and the Comic Truth*, “human neuroses have found their ideal dramatic transpositions in the humours of Ben Jonson’s farcical characters” (46). According to the theory of humours, man’s physiological and psychological health depends exclusively on the balance among his humours, the four liquids that, corresponding to the four primary elements of earth, air, fire, and water, control the human body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile or choler, and black bile or melancholy. Ideally, these four liquids exist in harmony, thus producing perfect physical and mental health. Whenever one of the humours becomes dominant, however, there is a corresponding imbalance in the temperament of the individual—that is, a sickness of the mind as well as of the body. In his “Induction” to *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1600), Jonson translated this (in his day) medical theory into dramatic terms:

As when some one peculiar quality  
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw  
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,  
In their confluxions, all to run one way,  
This may be truly said to be a Humour. (62)

In a famous essay on Jonson, T. S. Eliot himself concluded that “the Humour . . . is not a type . . . but a simplified and somewhat distorted individual with a typical mania” (18).

Bruno perfectly fits Jonson’s definition of a humours character. His “irrational and immoral” behavior can be explained in terms of an excess of yellow bile in the liver, which triggers his antics, his anger, and his irritability. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Bruno repeatedly complains of some ailment of the liver, the seat of choler. “Listen carefully,” he tells Stella in Act II, “I have aged greatly in three months. My color is dull, bile chokes me, my intestine sleeps in terrible nightmares, my hair falls out. If this uneasiness gnaws at

me much longer, I'll soon die. . . . The inflammation works especially on the liver" (57-58). At the end of the same act, he suddenly exclaims: "Ah, Estrugo, the ache is coming back!" (69; in the original production, Lugné-Poë put his hand to his liver while delivering this line). Finally, in Act III, Bruno grimaces in pain as he realizes how serious his condition is: "All the passages to my liver are blocked" (97).

According to the humoural theory, writes Henry Snuggs, "one's temperament could change under great stress of emotion or circumstance into another temperament" (118). This is exactly what happens to Bruno. In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the loving and caring Bruno turns into a monstrous tyrant because he thinks that he has detected a lust for Stella in the eyes of Petrus, their childhood friend and probably also Bruno's former rival in love. The stress of Petrus's unexpected visit after an absence of several years has thus altered Bruno's temperament. But such a change in this character's behavior or condition is possible only because of his physiological, humoural predisposition; external factors serve simply to tilt a precarious internal balance. In John Enck's words, "where humours dominate, no other psychology prevails" (45).

Unlike Othello, whose jealousy constantly needs Iago's prompting, Bruno is his own Iago: his humoural self-motivation alone moves the plot along and brings it to a resolution. And his humoural predisposition predates the play in which he stars. We learn during *The Magnanimous Cuckold* that Bruno's jealousy was already discernible, albeit in subdued form, when he and Petrus were vying for Stella's favors during their childhood games. Conversely, Bruno never really stops being what he used to be, that is, a generous being. Except that his charitableness is more and more overwhelmed by overflowing yellow bile, a product of the glandular fever from which he suffers, and this internal conflict slowly destroys him.

It follows that any purely psychological approach to *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, besides being doomed to fail, would be reductive of Crommelynck's metaphorical, universal art. "Some critics consider me a psychological playwright," Crommelynck said in a conversation reported by his friend René Gimpel "and they are wrong. Ah! That was Marcel Proust's big mistake: the critics told him so often he was a psychological writer that he lost his magnitude" (277; my trans.). In *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, writes Thierry Maulnier in the journal *Essor* in February of 1946, "we are not presented with the psychology of jealousy, but with its metaphysics."

Furthermore, Bruno's painful self-consciousness mirrors that of a century that had just gone through, in its second decade, the shattering experience of World War I. Through this character, Crommelynck ruthlessly caricatures the behavior of his contemporaries in their futile quest for the absolute, their

desperate search for answers during a troubled era that had seen the elegant sureties of its Belle Époque destroyed by the First World War. Crommelynck stigmatizes this hunger for absolutes through his portrait of the cuckold absurdly prostituting his wife to gain unconditional certainty of her infidelity. In this *The Magnanimous Cuckold* shows some affinities to the major avant-garde movements of the first quarter of the twentieth century, especially dada and late expressionism, which condemned the hopeless quest for moral and metaphysical certainties in a chaotic world by assuming a particularly cynical, even destructive stance.

Despite such tragic undertones, *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is above all a farce. The situation presented is far too grotesque, far too excessive, to be accepted within the framework of tragedy. Performed as a tragedy, the play soon moves beyond the spectator's ken and loses its credibility, as the production history of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* reveals. Lugné-Poë's original production at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre treated the play as a farce and was therefore an immense success; Jean-Louis Barrault's 1946 production in Geneva, although widely acclaimed, was less successful because it overemphasized the tragic undertone of the play. (See Moulin: 85, 101-102, 178, et passim; Knapp, 1985: 89, 96, 173). The vision of Bruno cuckolding himself in disguise can only be accepted within the logic of a farcical design. The absurdity of Bruno's behavior jolts the spectator and makes it impossible for him to identify with this protagonist in the usual tragic manner.

Meyerhold immediately understood this as he seized on *The Magnanimous Cuckold* as the perfect vehicle for his revolutionary constructivist theories (which were to exert a pervasive influence not only on theater in the twentieth century, but also on modern architecture, film, dance, fashion, graphic as well as industrial design, and to some extent music). This Russian director captured the essence of the comic drama through innovative and imaginative staging techniques, with the wheel of a converted windmill serving as the center of a multilevel or scaffolded set replete with ramps, chutes, and discs. The constructivist stage design (by Lyubov Popova) used geometric shapes, ladders, and doors not only to provide scenic elements essential to the business of Meyerhold's biomechanical actors, but also to create a world that illustrated both the interior and exterior action of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. As passions mounted in Crommelynck's play, for example, the big discs spun at appropriate speeds, the windmill beat the air, and actors slid between levels.

To study the great dramatic archetype of the cuckold, Crommelynck put it under the similarly magnifying, externalizing, even explosive lens of farce, where even the most appalling human vices can be ridiculed and where death itself loses its grimness, for it is considered the logical, necessary,



indeed natural conclusion of a life of gross excess. Bruno's jealousy is an irrational response, and the genius of Crommelynck lay in his choice of the most rational dramatic form in which to portray it, the one that makes an impossible situation seem to be totally probable. This combination of humor and cruelty, this blend of merriness and malice, which the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, is the dominant characteristic of the Belgian theater. In *The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama*, David Grossvogel significantly entitles the chapter devoted to Belgian drama "The Pain of Laughter," a label that certainly applies to *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

Like his countryman and fellow playwright Michel de Ghelderode, whose wretched characters Bruno prefigures (in particular the miser Hieronymus of *Red Magic* [1931]), Fernand Crommelynck is heir to that great Flemish artistic tradition wherein the grotesque, the absurd, and the morbid mingle in an atmosphere of unrestrained joy. By thus showing the ridiculousness of Bruno's craving for absolutes, his refusal to be satisfied with what he has, the playwright urges us to adopt his own discreetly optimistic philosophy, which is one of moderation and which tries to convince us that our happiness or contentment finally lies in our own hands.

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## 6. REPUTATION AND RECEPTION.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “What is the reputation of a particular play or playwright, how was it achieved and is it deserved, and how has this reputation affected perception of the drama in question, or of its author, over the years?”

### “The Friar’s Flaw, the Play’s Tragedy: The Experiment of *Romeo and Juliet*”

“It has been objected,” writes Frank Kermode, “that [*Romeo and Juliet*] lacks tragic necessity—that the story becomes tragic only by a trick. . . . [There is a conviction that] Shakespeare offends against his own criteria for tragedy by allowing mere chance to determine the destiny of the hero and heroine” (1055-56). We learn of the “trick” when Friar John—whom Friar Laurence has sent to Mantua with a letter telling Romeo to come and take Juliet away when she awakens, in her tomb, from her long sleep—returns and says:

Going to find a barefoot brother out,  
One of our order, to associate me,  
Here in this city visiting the sick,  
And finding him, the searchers of the town,  
Suspecting that we both were in a house  
Where the infectious did reign,  
Seal’d up the doors and would not let us forth,  
So that my speed to Mantua there was stay’d.

...

I could not send it—here it is again—  
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,  
So fearful were they of infection. (V.ii.5-12, 14-16; Gibbons ed.)

The trick, supposedly, is the introduction of the plague that has afflicted Verona and delayed Friar John, because he just happened to choose for a traveling companion a brother who has been attending the ill. R. G. Moulton is one of those who argue that “the . . . tragedy has all been brought about by [chance, by the] accidental detention of Friar John” (61).<sup>1</sup> Brian Gibbons argues similarly of Romeo’s discovery that a feast is to take place at Capulet’s house: “[Here] Shakespeare emphasizes the element of chance in the action. The servant Capulet has chosen [to deliver invitations] happens to be illiterate, a fact that his master has forgotten . . . The meeting with Romeo is sheer accident and, after the servant turns away, by chance Romeo regrets his off-hand answer and takes the list” (97, note).

Character, however—not chance—is at work at this point in the play. Capulet, in his typically rash manner, sends an illiterate servant on an errand that requires reading. The servant’s meeting with Romeo may be an accident, but Shakespeare undercuts this aspect of it and emphasizes Romeo’s own impulsiveness. He teases the servant, claiming to be able to read “if I know the letters and language” (I.ii.61); the servant interprets this to mean that Romeo cannot read, whereas it really means, of course, that he can read only the language he knows. When the servant starts on his way to find someone who *can* read, Romeo suddenly decides to help and calls him back: he reads the list aloud and thereby learns that the people on it are invited to Capulet’s house.

Capulet repeats this pattern in Act III, scene iv, as Paris starts to leave and he impulsively calls him back, offering him Juliet’s hand. Friar Laurence himself repeats the pattern in Act IV, scene i. After telling Juliet that, unfortunately, nothing can postpone her marriage to Paris and hearing her declare that she will kill herself rather than break her vow to Romeo, the friar says, “Hold, daughter (IV.i.68), echoing Romeo’s own “Stay, fellow” (I.ii.63) to the servant, and on the spur of the moment he offers her, in the sleeping potion, a desperate way out of her dilemma.

Such impulsiveness or rashness on Romeo’s and Capulet’s part in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) has been well documented. Capulet’s offer of Juliet in marriage to Paris without first consulting his daughter is followed by the equally impulsive, and ultimately disastrous, action of advancing the wedding from Thursday to Wednesday. The most obvious example of rash behavior on Romeo’s part occurs when, upon hearing from Balthasar that Juliet is dead, he goes immediately to the Apothecary’s to buy poison with which to kill himself at her side—instead of first investigating the circumstances of young Juliet’s “death.” Unlike Romeo’s and Capulet’s rashness, Friar Laurence’s has not been fully explored; it is, however, essential to an understanding of the

play as a character-driven work of fateful tragedy, as opposed to a contrived drama of accidental or fortuitous pathos.

Just as the illiterate servant, Paris, and Juliet in the above examples are not offered what they desire by chance, neither is Friar John detained by the plague by chance. The first cause of his detainment or delay is Friar Laurence's rashness, his ill-advised haste. He sends John to Mantua alone, all by himself, when he should remember, as Gibbons points out, that "the rule of the [Franciscan] order forbade [Friar John] to travel without the company of another [Franciscan] friar" (221, note). John is detained because the companion he finds has had contact with the sick; as a precaution, both he and the other friar are quarantined to prevent the spread of the disease. Even if one argues that it was Friar John's responsibility to find a traveling companion, not Friar Laurence's to find one for him, the latter should still have foreseen the improbability of his confrere's choosing a "safe" Franciscan companion in a city beset by the plague.<sup>2</sup> (In adherence to their mission, the Franciscans would be ministering to the sick, and would therefore be vulnerable not only to becoming infected but also to spreading the infection.) He should have gone to the trouble of providing a Franciscan companion for Friar John who had not had contact with the disease, or perhaps he should even have gone with John himself. Surely Friar Laurence knew of the plague's presence in Verona. Had Friar John left the city immediately in the company of an uninfected member of his order, he would never have been delayed and would consequently have been able to deliver the all-important letter to Romeo.

Bertrand Evans believes, with R. G. Moulton and others, that Friar John is detained by the plague by chance (845), but he argues that John's detention does not take away from the tragic inevitability of the play. Evans writes, "What would have happened had there been no incident of Friar John at all? The answer is certain: the suicide of Romeo, just as it stands. . . . It is Balthasar's action, not Friar John's, that needs to be and is consonant with the tragic pattern" (861; last sentence italicized by Evans). He sees *Romeo and Juliet*, finally, as a "tragedy of unawareness" (850):

Fate, or Heaven, as the Prince calls it, or the "greater power," as the Friar calls it, working out its purpose without the use of either a human villain or a supernatural agent sent to intervene in mortal affairs, operates through the common human condition of not knowing. Participants in the action, some of them in parts that are minor or seem insignificant, contribute one by one the indispensable stitches that make the pattern, and contribute them not knowing; that

is to say, they act when they do not know the truth of the situation in which they act. This truth being known, however, to us who are spectators. (850-851)

Balthasar fits into this scheme because he does not know that Juliet isn't really dead; he witnesses her funeral and leaves Verona at once to report her "death" to Romeo. Evans' view is problematic' however, because it does not take into account that, had Friar John reached Romeo with Friar Laurence's letter, neither Romeo nor Juliet would have committed suicide; explaining away John's detainment as chance or gratuitous to the action, then, is simply not good enough.

Evans does not believe that character flaw determines the play's tragedy: "However well or ill the tragic-flaw explanation fits the four greatest tragedies [by Shakespeare], it does not fit this one at all" (845). In my view, the flaw of impulsiveness or rashness does explain the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Friar Laurence's rashness, not chance, is responsible for Friar John's detention, not chance. And it is equally responsible for Balthasar's reaching Mantua, undeterred, with news of Juliet's "death." It is the Friar's fault that Balthasar is unaware of her feigned death. In Act III, upon sending Romeo to spend the night with Juliet and then flee to Mantua, Friar Laurence says to him, "I'll find out your man, / And he shall signify from time to time / Every good hap to you that chances here" (III.iii.168-170).

We know that, before departing for Mantua, Romeo himself tells Balthasar of his happy role as go-between, since the latter begs of him in Act V, "O pardon me for bringing these ill news, / Since you did leave it for my office, sir" (V.i.22-23).<sup>3</sup> It is another mark of Romeo's impulsiveness that he does not question this "*ill news*" from a source whose office it was to "signify from time to time / Every *good* hap to [him] that chances [in Verona]." Romeo asks if Balthasar has been sent by the Friar, but he gets no reply and neglects to ask again. He never inquires what his servant or Friar Laurence knows about the circumstances surrounding the death of one so young as Juliet.

The Friar, of course, never does find Balthasar and apprise him of the plan to get Juliet out of the marriage to Paris so that she can be reunited with Romeo. Had he sent *Balthasar* instead of Friar John to Mantua with the letter (as he had said he would at III.iii.168-170), Romeo's death as well as Juliet's would have been prevented: presumably, Romeo then would have returned to Verona at the appointed time to take Juliet away. Just as, in his haste to aid Romeo and Juliet, Friar Laurence forgets about the infectious disease that afflicts Verona and that will ultimately detain Friar John, he forgets to send Balthasar in John's place and even to inform him of the plan to reunite the lovers. In sum, Friar Laurence and Balthasar are acting independently to

serve Romeo, whereas they should be acting in concert. Similarly, Friar John is acting independently or autonomously when he leaves Friar Laurence's cell without a Franciscan companion free of infection. The image of John and a fellow friar, finally acting together but quarantined for it, and helpless to prevent the tragedy, is the opposite of that of Friar Laurence and Balthasar at the end of the play, finally discovering each other's actions yet freed in spite of them by the pardoning Prince, and able to join in the final reconciliation of the Capulet and Montague families.

The clearest instance of Friar Laurence's rashness or impulsiveness occurs in Act II, when he decides to honor Romeo's request to marry Juliet. The Friar's intentions are good, to be sure; he hopes, by joining the lovers in marriage, "to turn [their] households' rancour to pure love" (II.iii.88). But he acts without considering fully the possible consequences of such a secret marriage between members of feuding families. Ironically, he violates his own dictum: "Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast" (II.iii.90). In order to make Friar Laurence's rashness stand out, Shakespeare's contrasts it with the hesitation or delay of the Nurse—the only other character (except perhaps Balthasar) with knowledge of Romeo and Juliet's secret union.<sup>4</sup>

In Act II, scene v, for example, the Nurse returns home to give her mistress Romeo's message: Juliet is to ". . . devise / Some means to come to shrift this afternoon, / And there . . . at Friar Laurence's cell / Be shriv'd and married" (II.iv.176-179). But contrary to our expectations, the Nurse does not give the girl the happy news right away. The scene consists of 79 lines; the Nurse enters on line 17 but does not give her message until lines 69-70. She claims that she is tired and aching and needs to catch her breath; she is also, of course, teasing the impatient Juliet. But the Nurse's behavior here has an underlying meaning: Shakespeare delays the giving of the message as long as possible, in contrast with his hastening the Friar's agreement to marry Romeo and Juliet two scenes earlier, in order to suggest that the message is something Juliet should *not* want to hear and abide by. Marriage to Romeo may mean her doom, in other words, yet she rushes to it: throughout Act II, scene v, Juliet is "hot" to hear what her lover has to say. (The Nurse says to her on line 63, "Are you so hot?"; similarly, later in Act III, Lady Capulet tells her husband, when he is insisting that Juliet marry Paris, "You are too hot" [III.v.175].)

In Act III, scene ii, furthermore, the Nurse hesitates in announcing the sad news of Tybalt's death to Juliet. Although this scene is almost twice as long as scene v of Act II (143 lines to 79), and the Nurse consequently enters on line 31 instead of 17, she waits only until lines 69-70 to give her message—the same point at which she gave her message in Act II, scene v. The Nurse's delay is long enough, however, to provoke this response from Juliet: "What



devil art thou that dost torment me thus?" (III.ii.43). The Nurse is naturally in shock here over the death of Tybalt; indeed, she barely acknowledges Juliet upon entering. Shakespeare has her hesitate in giving the news of Tybalt's death, in contrast with his having Friar Laurence rush to get the news of Juliet's seeming death to Romeo four scenes later (IV.i.), in order to connect Juliet's own impulsiveness with Romeo's and to prefigure both their deaths at the end of the play.

The Nurse's delay, then, brings out a quality in Juliet that the Friar's haste brings out in Romeo: for when the Nurse does not immediately reveal who has been slain, Juliet assumes that Romeo is dead and impetuously vows to join him with the lines "Vile earth to earth resign, end motion here, / And thou and Romeo press one heavy bier" (III.ii.59-60). She does not commit suicide until the last scene of the play, of course; at this point Juliet is foreshadowing that suicide and Romeo's own. Wrongly believing her dead because Balthasar reached him and Friar John did not, Romeo poisons himself beside her bier; awakening to find him dead, Juliet mortally wounds herself with his dagger.

The Nurse's delay, unlike Friar Laurence's haste, is not itself lethal. She corrects Juliet's erroneous assumption about Romeo's death and tells her that "Tybalt is gone and Romeo banished. / Romeo that kill'd him, he is banished" (III.ii.69-70). Juliet will live to love Romeo before being parted from him once and for all in Act III, scene v. Once he receives Balthasar's fateful report. Romeo will not live to love her again.

\* \* \*

Character, then—Friar Laurence's, Capulet's, Romeo's—determines the destiny of Romeo and Juliet, not chance. It has often been said that this play is in part about the hastiness of youth.; I would say that it is in part about the hastiness of *everyone*, of the old as well as the young. One of the oddities of Shakespeare's tragedy is that the flaw of impulsiveness or rashness is shared by at least three characters. (Juliet's and the Nurse's impulsive moments are not as numerous and significant as the three men's. Clearly Tybalt and Mercutio are themselves impulsive, though not as central to the action as the trio of Friar Laurence, Capulet, and Romeo.) Moreover, the impulsiveness of Capulet extends all the way to his servants, who start the fight with Montague's men in the first scene of the play.

Another oddity of *Romeo and Juliet* is that neither Capulet, Romeo, nor Friar Laurence ever has any recognition of his flaw. Their non-recognition suggests, less that they are not fully tragic or sufficiently introspective, than that their impulsiveness was bred by the unnatural state in which they had been living—by the longstanding feud between the Montague and Capulet

families, which affected even non-family members like Friar Laurence. This may help to explain Shakespeare's curious mention only one time of the "infectious pestilence" (V.ii.10) afflicting Verona. The infectious pestilence may be seen as a metaphor for the spiritual one—the feud and the impulsiveness it causes in several characters—bedeviling two prominent families and their circles in the city. Friar John is confined so as to prevent the spread of infection and kill the literal plague; his confinement leads to the unfortunate deaths of Romeo and Juliet and as a result, paradoxically, to the killing of the spiritual plague afflicting their respective families.

Once the feud is about to end as a consequence of the deaths of the two lovers, impulsiveness in characters like Capulet and Friar Laurence disappears: tranquility rules in its place. Yet impulsiveness has otherwise nearly possessed a life of its own in *Romeo and Juliet*; to the extent that no one in the play ever mentions the original cause of the feud, the flaw that it bred appears to be almost disconnected from character. It comes to Verona, one does not exactly know whence, and it finally goes away.

Connected with this idea of impulsiveness-as-character-flaw is the following speech, given by Romeo before he goes to the feast at Capulet's house:

I fear too early, for my mind misgives  
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars  
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date  
With this night's revels and expire the term  
Of a despised life clos'd in my breast  
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.  
But he that hath the steerage of my course  
Direct my suit. . . . (I.iv.106-113)

Perhaps the "despised life" enclosed in Romeo's breast is the very impulsiveness that I have been speaking of. And perhaps the "consequence yet hanging in the stars" is impulsiveness's destruction at its own hands. Impulsiveness has spread among the members of both the Capulet and Montague families, as well as to their friends, to the point where it must conflict with itself: Romeo and Juliet's marriage, with Capulet's intention to give his daughter to Paris; Friar Laurence's plan to save Juliet from a second marital union, with Capulet's desire to see her wed even earlier than planned; Juliet's feigned death, with Romeo's suicide.

Impulsiveness is the real villain in this play that has no villains. It ultimately extinguishes itself, but not before Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, and Juliet are killed by it. Obviously, we do not lament impulsiveness's passing at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*. We may have been fascinated, however, by its

having afflicted almost everyone in the circumscribed world of the drama, instead of isolating itself in a single tragic figure. This may have something to do with the play's origins in comedy. The reconciliation of two feuding houses through marriage is normally a subject of comedy; in this instance, Shakespeare made it a subject of tragedy. Furthermore, as H. B. Charlton has observed, *Romeo and Juliet*, unlike the figures of Shakespeare's other tragedies, have "none of the pomp of historic circumstance about them; they [are] socially of the minor aristocracy who . . . stock [the] comedies . . . To choose such folk as these for tragic heroes was aesthetically well-nigh an anarchist's gesture" (51).

To afflict a miniature society with the flaw of impulsiveness, instead of a single tragic hero, was aesthetically well-nigh an anarchist's gesture, too. But it had the effect of making the flaw seem endemic to the society and thus of allowing the characters to exhibit it without final awareness, in much the same way that comic characters frequently exhibit foibles without ever being aware of them. Accordingly, the thought and talk at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* are of reconciliation of the Montague and Capulet families, not of full tragic recognition; no one identifies the general flaw that led to the play's catastrophe or any individual manifestations of it. (Friar Laurence, for example, admits that he married Romeo and Juliet and gave her the sleeping potion, but he does not connect these actions with impulsiveness or rashness on his part, leaving it to the Prince to decide if he has done anything wrong.) Shakespeare has his "comic" ending, arrived at by a tragic route.

Clearly Shakespeare's other tragedies contain comedy, but none joins comedy to tragedy in the special way that *Romeo and Juliet* does. Lawrence Edward Bowling has written that

In its broadest terms, *Romeo and Juliet* deals with the wholeness and complexity of things, in contrast with a partial and simple view. . . . The most important embodiment of the general theme deals with the discovery on the part of Romeo and Juliet and members of their families that individual human beings are not composed of abstract good or evil—that humanity is composed not of villains and saints but of human beings more or less alike. (208)

. . .

The meaning and significance of *Romeo and Juliet* may be more completely understood if we see the play as part of [the] greater movement toward a more relative and flexible view of human nature and human conduct [a movement begun during the Renaissance and championing the Hellenic view of life against the Hebraic one, which

prevailed in the Middle Ages and tended to regard human character and behavior in absolute terms of right and wrong]. (220)

The meaning and significance of *Romeo and Juliet* may also be more completely understood if we regard its tragic treatment of a traditionally comic subject as part of the greater movement toward seeing things in their wholeness and complexity, instead of from a single, partial, or simplistic point of view—seeing people and events as neither exclusively comic nor exclusively tragic, but as a distinctive combination of the two.

## Notes

1. See also George Pierce Baker (255): “At the moment when it is necessary that Romeo shall have news that Juliet is waiting for him in the tomb of her fathers, the swift, relentless logic of the play breaks down. . . . What is it that prevents Romeo from getting the news that his wife is merely stupefied, not dead? Merely a device of the dramatist; there is no inevitableness in this whatever. . . . That turn [the detention] is at the will of the dramatist, is melodrama, and it breaks the chain of circumstance necessary for perfect tragedy”; R. M. Alden (245): “When they seem nearest deliverance, Shakespeare unresistingly follows his source in making the final stroke of fate one of the merest chance, so completely unrelated to the principal action that the tragic plot seems actually to be forgotten or destroyed”; and Hazelton Spencer (220): “Fate manifests its dread control in the mere mischance of an undelivered letter, and *Romeo and Juliet* is more pathetic than powerful.”
2. My argument holds here, I believe, no matter how one interprets Friar John’s lines, “Going to find a barefoot brother out, / One of our order, to associate me, / Here in this city visiting the sick, And finding him . . .” (V.ii.5-8). John can mean either that he was trying to find any Franciscan in Verona to accompany him, or that he was trying to find a specific Franciscan, an acquaintance of his. But the chances of *any* Franciscan’s being unexposed to the plague in the city, be it someone known to Friar John or not, are equally small. (For the purposes of the dramatic action, the friars John and Laurence themselves have not been exposed to infection. They are victims of the *spiritual* plague, the feud, that besets the Montague and Capulet families, as I discuss in the second paragraph of the second section of my essay. Friar John, for his part, does not have much time to deliberate the wisdom of traveling with a possible carrier of infection: he has been told by his apparent superior, Friar Laurence, to *speed* to Mantua (IV.i.123-124), and he *must* be accompanied there by a fellow Franciscan.

4. One could interpret these lines to mean that Romeo told Balthasar to be quick to report any bad news. I interpret them to mean the opposite: that Romeo, like Friar Laurence, told Balthasar to report the good, as if all the news would in any case be so; this is why Balthasar excuses himself for bringing ill tidings. Romeo *expects* to hear something good, as his impatient questioning of his servant suggests:

New from Verona! How, now Balthasar,  
Dost thou not bring me letters from the Friar?  
How doth my lady? Is my father well?  
How doth my Juliet? That I ask again,  
For nothing can be ill if she be well. (V.i.12-16)

So cowed is Balthasar by Romeo's expectation of good news that he responds to his master's last line above with an apparent lie: "Then she is well and nothing can be ill" (V.i.17). According to Gibbons (212, note), however, it was proverbial during the Elizabethan era to say that the dead who had gone to heaven were well. The irony in this instance, of course, is that Juliet is well and alive.

Romeo may have dreamed the night before his servant's arrival that "my lady came and found me dead" (V.i.6), but the dream ended happily: "[She] breath'd such life with kisses in my lips / That I reviv'd and was an emperor" (V.i.8-9). On the basis of this vision, as well as his intuition in general, Romeo so anticipates a good report from Verona that when he does not get it, he doesn't know what to do: he fails to ask the necessary questions, allowing himself to be taken over by impulse instead.

4. The Nurse exhibits her own bit of impulsiveness in switching her preference of husbands for Juliet from Rome to Paris once the former has been banished from Verona. Like the other characters' impulsiveness, the Nurse's turns out to have tragic consequences: her sudden disparagement of Romeo is the immediate cause of Juliet's decision to ask the Friar how she can remain faithful to Romeo—that is, how she can avoid marriage to Paris.

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# “*Death of a Salesman* and Death of a Salesman: The Swollen Legacy of Arthur Miller”

## Introduction: Death in Two Senses

In an essay about *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the playwright David Mamet wrote the following:

The greatest American play, arguably, is the story of a Jew told by a Jew and cast in “universal” terms. Willy Loman is a Jew in a Jewish industry. But he is never identified as such. His story is never avowed as a Jewish story, and so a great contribution to Jewish American history is lost. It’s lost to culture as a whole, and, more importantly, it’s lost to the Jews, its rightful owners. (Mamet is quoted on pp. 821-822 of the Fall 1998 issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review*, in an interview in which Arthur Miller agreed only with Mamet’s characterization of Willy as a Jew and of his story as a Jewish one.)

I would like to propose that the divided impulse in Miller—a division immediately noticeable in his choice of first names for his characters—between making his play and his protagonist Jewish, and making them universal or representatively American, was largely responsible for the flaws in the drama that I am now going to detail. For it is time, now that Arthur Miller has been dead for ten years, to take another look at his vaunted reputation, his inflated legacy, and pare it down to its rightful size: medium.

## Section I: Compliments

Let’s begin in reverse, with some of the reasons why *Death of a Salesman* continues to occupy the place it does in American drama and our national imagination. *Salesman* does indeed contain the idea for a great play, and I would maintain that its immense international success comes from the force of that idea prevailing over the defects in execution. The force takes hold with the very title, which is highly evocative—both declaring the significance of a (not “the”) salesman’s death and finding value in his very ordinariness or anonymity—and is amplified by the opening sight of Willy Loman coming in the door. That sight is a superb theater image of our time, as unforgettable an icon as Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage and her wagon (another traveling salesman!): the salesman home, “tired to the death” (13), lugging his two heavy sample cases, after having been rejected by the big milk-filled bosom of the nation from which he had expected so much nourishment. What does he sell? The commodity is never identified, for Willy is, in a sense, selling himself, and is therefore a survivor of that early tradition of drummers in



this country: men who, viewing their personality—not their product—as their chief ware, claimed they could sell anything.

The force of *Salesman's* idea, moreover, continues fitfully to grasp at us: the idea of a man who has sold things without making them, who has paid for other things without really owning them, who is an insulted extrusion of commercial society battling for some sliver of authenticity before he slips into the dark. And battling without a real villain in sight. Willy's boss, Howard, comes closest to that role when he fires or retires Willy for poor performance, but Howard's failing is not ruthlessness; it is lack of understanding (as exhibited in one of the last things he says to his ex-employee, "Pull yourself together, kid" [84]), a weakness that links him to Willy himself. The American economy in the late 1940s was dominated not by the Howards of the world, but by large corporations whose charismatic founders, the "robber barons," were long dead. Instead of clear-cut enemies, then, there were vast, confusing hierarchies, and, to his credit, Miller was one of the first writers to comprehend this change. For late capitalism is depicted in his play as having become impersonal and bureaucratic; instead of class struggle, there is simple anomie.

## Section II: Detriments

Nonetheless, to read or see *Death of a Salesman* again is to perceive how Arthur Miller lacked the control and vision to fulfill his own idea. First, consider the diction of the play, because a play is its language, first and finally. And *Salesman* falters badly in this regard. At its best, its true and telling best, the diction is first-generation Brooklyn Jewish—the kind of English that not only is spoken with a muscular, guttural, sing-songy Brooklyn accent, but that also retains the poetic imagery, forceful expression, and ritualistic repetition of Yiddish (the "jüdisch" German dialect spoken by East-European Jewish immigrants as a form both of self-assertion and self-defense) while discarding German syntax, grammar, and of course words. (Some examples from the play: "Life is a casting off" [15]; "A man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime" [54]; "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" [56]; "Money is to pass" [64]; "I slept like a dead one" [71]; "He's only a little boat looking for a harbor" [76]; "Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing" [130].)

Often, however, the dialogue slips into a fanciness that is slightly ludicrous. To hear Biff say, "I've been remiss" (60); to hear Linda say, "He was crestfallen" (15) or "You're too accommodating, dear" (14); to listen to Willy declare, "There's such an undercurrent in him" (15), "That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with" (52), or "The woman has waited and the

woman has suffered. [That's] the gist of it" (107); to listen to Biff asking Happy, "Are you content?" (23), to Happy arguing that Biff's "just a little overstrung" (115), and to Charley finally opining that "Nobody dast blame this man" (138)—all of this is like watching a car run off the road momentarily onto the shoulder.

The same goes for Miller's deployment of the nominative and accusative cases as well as the subjunctive mood. This is a play in which you can actually hear the less-than-educated, Brooklynite Lomans incongruously use the subjunctive "were" correctly (24), and unabashedly utter "I and Biff" (17), "You and I" (23, 31, 63), and "Biff and I" (135) as if they were reading out of a grammar book. ("Him and me" is what people like this would normally say, but you will hear such an expression only once in *Death of a Salesman*, on page 125.) And if the argument is made that the Lomans (like Jews who value education, even though they may not have it) merely aspire to speak in an educated manner—pretending, in keeping with their essential character, to be more book-learned than they are—I would respond that Miller could have helped his cause by having his characters make the mistakes that almost all such strivers make, such as using "I" when "me" is the grammatically correct form (as in the phrase "between you and me").

Then there is the language of Willy's older brother Ben, the apparition of piratical success. He speaks like nothing but a symbol, and not a symbol connected with Willy in any perceptible way. (As in these instances: "When I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich" [48]; "Never fight fair with a stranger . . . You'll never get out of the jungle that way" [49]; "With one gadget [Father] made more in a week than a man like you could make in a lifetime" [49].) Miller *says* Ben is Willy's brother, that's all. Furthermore, the very use of diamonds as the source of Ben's wealth has an almost childishly symbolic quality about it. When Miller's language is close to the stenographic, the ethnically remembered, it's good; otherwise, and especially in Ben's case, it tends to literary juvenility—a pretended return from pretended experience.

Thematically, too, *Death of a Salesman* is cloudy. It is hard to believe that, centrally, Miller had anything more than muzzy anti-business, anti-technology impulses in his head; and that muzziness may have been caused by Miller's subliminal knowledge that Jews conquered the world of American business (as Mamet implies in the quotation from the *Michigan Quarterly Review*) in almost every conceivable way. Is Willy Loman a man shattered by business failure, for example, and by disappointment in his sons? Then why, when he is younger and at least making a living, when he is proud of his sons and they of him, does he lie about his earnings to Linda and then have to correct himself? Why, at the peak of what is otherwise a molehill of a life,

does he undercut his own four-flushing to tell his wife that people just pass him by and take no notice of him?

The figure that comes through this play, in fact, is not of a man brought down by various failures but of a mentally unstable man in whom the fissures have only increased. (It must be said, however, that what in the 1930s and 1940s was deemed “delusional”—namely, Willy’s belief in a link between likeability or “personal attractiveness” [16] and success—is now being regularly confirmed in the national popularity contests we Americans call elections.) Willy is thus shown to be at least as much a victim of psychopathy as of the bitch-goddess Success. When was he ever rational or dependable? Is this really a tragedy of belief in the American romance, or is it merely the end of a clinical case?

The evidence in the play for Willy’s psychopathy is plentiful, so much so that it has led to his being diagnosed as manic-depressive before the age of anti-depressant drugs (by Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* in the fall of 1998, in a review of the Chicago revival [and Broadway-bound production] of *Death of a Salesman*), as well as to his being diagnosed as “other-directed”—or possessing a value system entirely determined by external norms—from a sociological point of view (by Walter Goodman in a *New York Times* column of April 1999). Consider, for instance, Willy’s many contradictions of himself: evidence that goes beyond normal human inconsistency into the realm of severe internal division, which may have been produced by Willy’s other-directedness but would surely have produced psychosis in the man himself, had he not committed suicide.

To wit, he yells at Biff, “Not finding yourself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!” (16), but later adds, “Greatest thing in the world for him was to bum around” (67). “Biff is a lazy bum!” (16), Willy grumbles; then, almost immediately thereafter, we hear him say, “And such a hard worker. There’s one thing about Biff—he’s not lazy” (16). Father gives the following advice to his son before the big interview with Bill Oliver: “Walk in very serious. You are not applying for a boy’s job. . . . Be quiet, fine, and serious. Everybody likes a kidder, but nobody lends him money” (64). A few lines later we hear Willy command, “Walk in with a big laugh. Don’t look worried. Start off with a couple of your good stories to lighten things up. It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it—because personality always wins the day” (65).

Willy’s memories of past conversations produce similar inconsistencies. He excused Biff’s stealing a football by arguing, “Sure, he’s gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn’t he? Coach’ll probably congratulate you on your initiative!” (30). Yet Willy soon forgets this excuse: “He’s giving it back, isn’t he? Why is he stealing? What did I tell him? I never in my life told him anything but decent things” (41). One minute “Chevrolet . . . is the

greatest car ever built" (34); the next, "That goddamn Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car" (36). And, in consecutive sentences, Willy can declare the following without blinking: "I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, people don't seem to take to me" (36).

For someone like Willy, naturally, the past and the present duel with each other as well as with themselves. He remembers saying, for example, that "the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead" (33); yet he perceives no inconsistency between that statement and this one in the present action of the play: "A man who can't handle tools is not a man" (44). He remembers telling Linda that "[People] seem to laugh at me" (36). But he can tell his grown sons, "They laugh at me, huh? Go to Filene's, go to the Hub, go to Slattery's, Boston. Call out the name Willy Loman and see what happens!" (62). And all of this from a man who has the nerve to wonder aloud, "Why am I always being contradicted?" (17).

### Section III: Psychology and Drama

But, putting this mountain of Miller-provided evidence aside, let's assume for the sake of argument that Willy is *not* a psychopath, that he was a relatively whole man now crushed by the American juggernaut. To return to *Salesman's* theme, what then is its attitude toward that capitalistic juggernaut, toward business ideals? I ask such a question because there is no *anagnorisis* for Willy that would suggest the play's attitude, no moment of recognition for him, let alone a great downfall: he dies believing in money. In fact, he kills himself for it, to give his son Biff the insurance benefit as a stake for more business, and because he confuses materialistic success with a worthiness to be loved. (Ironically, this insurance windfall is something Biff may not want, and which he may not even receive on account of his father's death-by-suicide.)

Willy's other son, Happy, is himself wedded to money values and says over his father's coffin that he's going to stick to them for his father's sake. Similarly, Biff was so aggrandized by his father that he became kleptomaniacal as a boy and even now, after his father-as-idol has collapsed, he can't resist stealing a successful businessman's fountain pen as a niggling vindictiveness against that man's success and his own lack of it. The only alternatives to the business ethos ever produced in *Death of a Salesman* are Willy's love of tools and seeds, building and planting, and Biff's love of the outdoor life. As between romances—neither of which, in this case, is so easily separable from the other, the frontier ethic being nearly synonymous in the end with a rapaciously capitalistic one (as David Mamet's own best plays, *American Buffalo* [1975] and *Glengarry Glen Ross* [1984], have shown)—I'll take business,

for all Biff's talk at the end of knowing who he is, where he stands, and what he wants (or imagines he can get) apart from the world of hard-driving capitalism.

Miller confuses matters even further by the success not only of Dave Singleman, the gentlemanly eighty-four-year-old salesman who was Willy's inspiration (and who, singular man that he was, died, according to Willy, the regal "death of a salesman" [81]), but also of young Bernard next door as a lawyer in the Establishment world with a wife and his own two sons. This is a deserved success for which Willy feels envy—as he does for the success of Bernard's father, Charley, who is a good man like his son (lending Willy money which he knows cannot be repaid, even creating a job for Willy that the latter pridefully turns down), as well as a good businessman with his own office and secretary.

Yet Charley himself contributes to the confusion in *Death of a Salesman*. For, during the play's Requiem, he can be heard to endorse Willy's view of himself when he says to Biff,

You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And . . . a salesman . . . don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. . . . A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (138)

In Act II, however, in an attempt to puncture Willy's self-image, Charley had said almost the exact opposite to his next-door neighbor after Howard fired him:

CHARLEY. . . . The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that.

WILLY. I've always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well liked, that nothing—

CHARLEY. Why must everybody like you? . . . (97)

What we are left with in this play, then, is neither a critique of the business world nor an adult vision of something different and better, but the story of a man (granting he was sane) who failed, as salesman and father—or who failed to live up to his own unrealistic dreams of what salesmanship and fatherhood constitute—and who made things worse by refusing to the end to admit those failures, which he knew were true.

## Section IV: Pathos, Tragedy, and Verism

The last sentence in the previous section certainly describes a play, and possibly a good one; but it is a quite different play from *Death of a Salesman*, a work that implies, in its atmosphere and mannerisms, radical perception about deep American ills. The difference is between pedestrian pathos and exalted tragedy, between the destruction of a decent but unknowing man and a great or special one who simultaneously deserves, and does not deserve, his fate. And, ironically, Miller himself understood this distinction, even if, in his famous essay “Tragedy and the Common Man”—a not-so-veiled argument for the tragic status of *Salesman*—he unwittingly described Willy Loman when he wrote,

Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force. (3)

Miller makes clear by the very title of his essay that the common man is as appropriate a subject for tragedy, in its highest sense, as the royal leader. Yet modern writers have found it difficult to create powerful tragedies with workaday salesmen, let alone corporate executives, as protagonists. There are at least two reasons for this, apart from Miller’s own seeming reluctance, in *Death of a Salesman*, to associate commonness with Jewishness. First, for us to feel the full impact of the fate the tragic hero brings on himself, he must have a nearly complete freedom of action. In other words, the more we feel that the hero has been able to choose his course of action without restriction, the more we sense the tragic irony of his choices. Second, it is vital that the tragic hero’s actions have some deep moral, spiritual, political, or philosophical significance for the whole of his society. For this reason, the classic dramatists generally dealt with protagonists whose lives were lived out in a public arena—so much so that their every act or decision would have a *direct* effect on everyone around them, on all whom they led or governed. As aristocratic leaders, furthermore, the significance of their deeds and words could be underlined or highlighted for the audience through the response of the chorus, or, in Elizabethan tragedy, by the reaction of a group of retainers and courtiers.

Modern democratic societies, however, no longer accept the kind of absolute kings whose personal choices are matters of basic public import—and acceptance. Of course, our leaders have great political power, but it is worth noting that few contemporary dramatists have sought to make tragic



figures of our presidents and legislators—except, as in the case of a Richard Nixon, where the leader arrogates unto himself a greater power than is lawful. Although these personages lead public lives that might be dramatized in the manner of classical tragedy, they rarely are. For our concept of power in a democracy implies that personal impulses cannot be erected into commands without taking account of the many diverse groups whose consent is necessary to the exercise of authority. Therefore we feel our leaders lack that total freedom of action which the tragic protagonist seems to require.

The pathos of the salesman, by contrast, lies in the fact that he has neither sufficient freedom of action nor demonstrable public significance. Indeed, he is one of many just like himself, and, unlike classical or neoclassical tragic protagonists, appears to have been conditioned passively, even gladly, to accept the very conditions of life that will lead to his own annihilation. (I don't say "downfall" because a character like Willy is such a "low-man" that his fall can hardly be said to be dramatic or striking; another way of putting this is that, as a hero, Willy is in effect dead at the start and the play is therefore one long autopsy.) This may in the end be sad, but it does not arouse the same kind of feeling as the classic tragedies. And doubly so in Willy Loman's case, for (in this instance through no fault or flaw of his own) he is a man caught between the two worlds of Christianity and Judaism, and one whose very ethnic or religious identity is therefore in question—apart from what his profession may be, what social standing he has, or what political beliefs he holds.

I would like now to make a few additional points about the play, connected more with its verism than with its attempt at tragedy. When I saw the 1952 film of *Death of a Salesman*, which made the play's environment more vivid (unlike Dustin Hoffman's 1985 television film of the theatrical production in which he had starred on Broadway), I could not help wondering why Willy had money worries: he had almost paid off the mortgage on his house, which was a piece of real estate in an increasingly valuable and desirable section, to judge by the building going on all around it. I do not think this is a petty literal point in a realistic play whose lexicon is bill-paying. Further, all the dialogue about Willy's father, with his wagon-travels through the West and his flutes, seems false than ever, Miller's imposition on this Brooklyn Jewish play to give it historical base and continental (if not Christian) sweep. As with the character of Ben, there is a schism in tenor between such material and the rest of the play.

Last, a point that is strangely more apparent now, I am guessing, than it was when *Death of a Salesman* first appeared in 1949 (to judge from all the contemporary commentary): the drama is set in the late 1940s and reaches back some fifteen years to the early 1930s, yet there is scarcely a mention of the Great Depression—or of World War II, for that matter. How did



Biff and Happy escape the war, and, if they did so, were they criticized or attacked for not serving in the military? If they did not escape military service, wouldn't the reunited brothers have had something to say about it—especially, if they were Jewish, about the Holocaust? And wouldn't the postwar economic boom itself have had some effect in the present on Willy's view of a promise-crammed (if maddeningly competitive) America, not to speak of the Depression's effect in the past on Willy's view of that same America and his decreased earning power in it? (Miller may have tried to make up for this omission with his quasi-autobiographical *The American Clock* [1980], in which a narrator reminisces about the plight of his family during the Depression. But the only consistent effect of this otherwise platitudinous play is the instant pathos that attaches to memory, especially when, in production, the rememberer is standing before us, stepping into and out of the past.)

Make no mistake: I am not implying, as some critics have, that by virtue of its flashback structure—between the immediate postwar period and the time of the Great Depression—*Death of a Salesman* would have made a better film (with its dissolves, cross-fading, and minutely detailed realism as opposed to the modified, simplified, or theatricalized kind) than a play. In fact, in the case of Miller's play, the theater has a superior ability to suggest both the childishness of Willy's sons (by having the adult actors of Biff and Happy “unrealistically” play their boyhood selves onstage) and the momentousness of Willy's adultery (by having it occur, not “on location” in Boston, but on the forestage—right in the Lomans' living room, as it were). And some of the play, as play, is touching or poignant still: Willy when he is at his most salesman-like, the Requiem over his coffin, and even the very flashback structure of *Salesman*. For it suggests that, without the flashbacks originating in Willy's mind, the information conveyed by them—about such subjects as adultery, lying, cheating, and failure—would not be revealed in the present in dialogue among the Lomans, who, unlike the Tyrones of Eugene O'Neill's great, and overtly Irish-American Catholic, family drama *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), do not communicate so well or so openly.

## Section V: Flashbacks and Family, or Judaism and Christianity

The flashback structure of *Death of a Salesman* suggests something ominous, as well, something connected with what I earlier called Miller's divided impulse between composing a Jewish domestic drama and writing a representative play on the American experience. That is, Miller seems not only structurally to have split his play between a climactic frame covering the last hours of Willy's life up to his climactic suicide, and an episodic form that enacts the Loman past in a series of flashback scenes. The dramatist seems

also to have created a formal equivalent for his own divided consciousness on the subject of a Jewish protagonist versus a Christian one. For who is to say that Willy's flashbacks are objectively true, as they are always assumed to be? Might they not be the subjective or expressionistic visions, even hallucinations, of a feverish mind on the verge of collapse, instead of a mere device for explicating past events that the Lomans otherwise do not, or do not want to, talk about? (This is a kind of memory play, after all, and memory, even in a mentally healthy person, is notoriously fallible as well as selectively creative—as we know from at least one other famous memory play, Harold Pinter's *Old Times* [1971].)

Further, might Willy's flashbacks therefore not only be his attempt to remember a pivotal year in his and his family's past, 1931 or 1932 (football star Biff's senior year of high school, during which he discovers his father's adulterous relationship with the woman in Boston, and when Willy purportedly turns down a job in Alaska working for his brother Ben); might these flashbacks also be Willy's attempt to fictionalize part of his past as well as to portray some of it truthfully? After all, no character in the play, except Willy, uses Ben's name or refers to the elder brother's South African business ventures, nor does any character besides Willy refer to his wagon-travels West, as a boy, with his flute-carving father. And most of these references, by Willy, occur in his flashbacks themselves, during conversations with Ben.

Could Ben and the wagon-travels, then, be Willy's invention, his attempt, if you will, as a proxy for Miller (a Jew whose three marriages were all to Christian women, and who never took the stance of a public *Jewish* intellectual during his long career), to Christianize or universalize his past? Might this not be suggested somehow in production, visually as well as vocally, through the use of different actors in the flashbacks in the roles of Linda, Biff, and Happy—whose appearance and manner of speaking would make clear that they were Willy's idealized Christian versions of his real wife and sons? Would such an interpretation of the context of *Salesman's* flashbacks not be truer to the play as it stands, particularly if this re-imagining were an exculpatory move on Willy's part, to blame his failings on anti-Semitism and thereby suggest that his life would have been better—materially, domestically, psychologically—had he only been a Protestant? And wouldn't such an interpretation be true as well to Miller's acknowledgment in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* interview, in response to David Mamet's remarks, that Willy was in fact a Jew and his story a Jewish one?

Moreover, doesn't the need for such interpretation, or reinterpretation, suggest that, in the deepest sense, Miller's crisis is religious? Set in a solid Jewish or Christian, or Marxist or even ancient Greek cosmos, with the terrain open and the compass steady, with hope clear and anguish purposeful,

he could have lived to make dramas out of his life, dramas meaningful to his fellow citizens and constructive of society as a whole. Instead, Miller found himself in a world with a wispy ethos and a dim cosmology, where there was no common sounding board of aspiration around him to echo his words, no grand, austere design against which his characters could measure themselves. This was, and is, a desolate world in which to look for tragic art; and some of that desolation must necessarily have been in Miller himself.

He was a youth in the Depression, one should recall, and grew up an acolyte of social justice. (His behavior before the Congressional committee that investigated Communist infiltration of the arts was probably the most dignified of any witness in that committee's long, inglorious record.) As with so many others, however, his socio-political beliefs failed to sustain him, and he found himself a god-hungry man without a god. Miller always had in him the fever of large issues; he showed no interest in plays, however fine, about domestic triangles or sensitive adolescents. He wanted to create works every one of which was, by implication, about everything. But he could not find the enduring moral backdrop or the large emotions possible only in a world with some sort of religious faith. And, in this sense, Miller's artistic life—disconnected from a society that defies connection, searching for a temple it can serve—is a truer tragedy than any he ever tried to write; as an artist, that is, he himself was the tragic agonist he had always tried to depict in his work.

Tragedy aside for the moment, it must be said that much of the material in *Death of a Salesman* on Miller's favorite theme, the love-hate of father and son, is itself still touching. And that leads to a peculiar point about this play, which is that adverse criticism of it is markedly *ex post facto*. Not many of *Salesman's* severest critics, including this one, deny being moved by it. For the drama bristles with spears of pathos that no critical shield can deflect. (Nonetheless, too much of its paterfamilial plot does hinge on Biff's discovery, in Boston, of Willy's unfaithfulness to Mom—to judge from the evidence, the only such infidelity [with a woman nearly his own age], not one of any number of promiscuous acts on this husband's part—an incident Biff understandably remembers while implausibly forgetting that he failed math [110], failed to graduate from high school, and consequently forfeited the college football scholarship he had been offered.)

Indeed, the political issues in the play—its major one naturally being the plight of the exploited common man in capitalist America—now seem infinitely less urgent than its emotional issues, which are rooted in the play's family relationships. Bottom-line employers such as Howard no longer throw away older workers like “a piece of fruit” (82)—union vigilance and statutes against ageism provide some protection against such abuses, though it is also

the case that a man in his sixties like Willy would be called middle-aged today. Protection is also provided by such mechanisms as Social Security, employee benefits, annuity plans, Roths and Keoghs, and similar devices designed to help soften the economic problems of used-up or tired-out workers.

What have remained the same, though, are the family conflicts of these people, and to some extent their spiritual emptiness: again, something that might have been alleviated by the Lomans' Jewish identity, at the very least—had Miller allowed them to have one. And all the more so since much of what power *Death of a Salesman* still has derives from the sure-fire conventions of Yiddish domestic theater. As if it were in a direct line from such Jewish-immigrant drama through Clifford Odets, Miller's play climaxes with a rebellious son being reconciled with his estranged father. (Compare Al Jolson, in the film *The Jazz Singer* [1927], being forgiven by his stern Orthodox father for having become a *teaterzinger* rather than a cantor. And compare *Salesman* with Miller's own *The Creation of the World and Other Business* [1972], which was meant to be a Jewish domestic comedy on the *first* father-son story, that of God and Adam, but where, ethnically speaking, the playwright fiddled, faltered, and fumbled once again.)

## Section VI: Looking Back in Bemusement

But, as in the case of the earlier compliments I paid the play, these are all sound moments in a flabby, occasionally false, even schizoid work whose only major female character (Linda Loman), I might add, is less a character than a saint, on the one hand, or a co-dependent, on the other. Miller had gift enough to get the idea for *Death of a Salesman*, but then—in the face of his divided dramatic impulse—he settled for the dynamics of the idea itself, supported by a vague high-mindedness, to write his play for him. (For some critics a better play than *Salesman* and therefore Miller's best, *The Crucible* [1953] itself suffers from a similar defect or division: its last act is a moral-metaphysical drama of adultery, while its first three acts compose a political parable in which the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 are used as a parallel with McCarthyism during the 1950s.) As the world knows, many viewers and readers have taken the intent for the deed. Some have not.

And my guess is that the latter group will ultimately prevail in any assessment of *Death of a Salesman* and of Miller's career generally. We must recall that several American playwrights, such as Elmer Rice, Robert Sherwood, and Maxwell Anderson, had similarly large reputations during their lives, in the United States as well as abroad, and all during their lives there were a few qualified critics who dissented; now those reputations are past the point even of diminishment. Excepting O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, Miller has the largest international reputation of any American dramatist

ever; and, now that he has passed away, the small group of dissenters he himself had during his lifetime should begin to grow in number. For them, there have always been two Millers: the great dramatist in general opinion, and the much lesser, mostly middling one in their view. (The charter members of this minority, incidentally, were Eric Bentley, Robert Brustein, Richard Gilman, and Stanley Kauffmann.)

One reason I have always assumed for Miller's success in foreign countries is that his language improves in translation—which, at its best, is a kind of rewriting. One reason I have always assumed for his success everywhere is that he makes people feel they have gone on daring intellectual-spiritual expeditions when they have really stayed cozily at home the whole time. Miller supplies the illusion of depth, that is, without endangering or enlightening anyone, and he gives his audience a painlessly acquired feeling of superiority just by their having been present at his plays. He does so by dealing exclusively with *received* liberal ideas, whereas the best social dramatists, like Henrik Ibsen, have usually dealt with dangerous or revolutionary ideas. (In 1950 Miller adapted [and lessened] Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* [1883], but he could not, on his own, have tackled its theme: that the majority is always wrong.)

I am not accusing Miller of cunning; he never tried to put anything over on anyone, like such "serious" filmmakers as Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen. Despite the fact that all of his plays, not just *Death of a Salesman*, suffer to one degree or another from fuzzy concepts, transparent mechanics, superficial probes, and pedestrian diction, he certainly always did his sincere best. True, *After the Fall* (1964) is tainted with a wriggly feeling of exculpation for some matters in his private life (connected with his marriage to Marilyn Monroe and his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee), but usually the falseness that crops up in his work is of another sort—the peculiar falseness of honest writers who are not talented enough to keep free of dubious artistic means, or, as I suggested earlier, of honest writers whose shackles are, to some degree, the shackles of our time. And who, as a result of their seeming desperation, grab at material that is available and try to make it larger than it is.

The unhappiest product of this condition in Miller's career was *The Misfits* (1961), the screenplay in which he tried to impose a *Götterdämmerung* on the doings of a mustang hunter and a stripteaser. But he seemed increasingly to recognize the thematic hollowness of his script, trying to compensate for it with verbal decoration, and the result was a tiny, insecurely motivated story burdened with some of the most top-heavy language ever to be heard from the screen. This desperation of Miller's, I am inferring, arose from the feeling, again, that here he was with spiritual vision and artistic ability but

the *time* was out of joint, as if he were a sculptor on an island with only a few scraps of marble to use.

Maybe it was this desperation that also made Miller reach for the material of *A View from the Bridge* (1955). Yet another tale of Sicilian fatalism and fatality, the drama here derives from Brooklyn longshoreman Eddie Carbone's insistence on catastrophe—the source of which is his unconscious, quasi-incestuous love for his niece—while we sit clucking as if we were watching a man drive ninety miles an hour on a slippery road. Despite the author's best intentions, what we see can be nothing more than a bloody accident, not a harrowing tragedy, because of Eddie's pathetic character. Perhaps it is vestigial snobbery to imply, as I do above, that tragedy can happen only to princes; but *A View from the Bridge* proves that tragedy cannot happen to longshoremen unless they are epic longshoremen. To provide a classic flavor to this play, Miller even used a one-man chorus, the lawyer Alfieri, to address us and to explain the tragic content, to try to kindle Athenian terror where we might feel only police-blotter sensation.

So much is Miller's overreaching the norm, rather than the exception, during his career that going back to *Death of a Salesman*, Miller's most highly regarded work yet a relatively early one for him, has been for me like going to the funeral of a man you wish you could have liked more. The occasion seals your opinion because you know there is no hope of change or improvement—as there was when the play just before *Salesman*, *All My Sons*, was produced in 1947. (Unsatisfactory as this drama may have been, it had enough in it to tease the hopeful, to nourish the possibility that its imitativeness and awkwardness might be shucked, that the playwright might yet stand free to wrestle the angels and win some cosmological victories for all of us.) Perhaps now that he is no longer around to guard his own reputation—to “sell” it, as it were—the “double” Miller will die away and only the mediocrity will remain.

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## 7. COMPARISON AND CONTRAST.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “Of two or more plays—by a single dramatist or by different dramatists—similar in style, structure, or meaning, what are the differences, if any, in socio-historical context between them, and what precisely are these plays’ similarities as well as their differences?”

### “‘Right Up into the Skies’: Transfiguration and Ascent in Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, *Misalliance*, and *Saint Joan*”

Deeply imbedded in Christian theology is a tension between life in the world and life beyond it. Christ, as the manifestation of God, enters the world in the humblest form imaginable to live among human beings as a teacher and healer; however, underlying the story of his Passion—by far the most dramatic portion of his life—is the impulse to escape this world for another, more satisfying one. The flogging and crucifixion underscore the “man-ness,” some would say “mean-ness,” of Christ’s existence on earth, but the resurrection and ascension point toward deliverance from worldly constraints.

The belief that ascent towards God, in the “other world,” is humanity’s natural destination finds reflection in the medieval chain of being, which is organized hierarchically from the natural to the supernatural. Man, in imitation of Christ, must operate in the world but at the same time seeks ultimately to leave it, and, cleansed of his sins, his departure is always seen as an ascent—a release from the earth’s gravity. The metaphoric ascent of man is most easily seen in the Gothic cathedral, whose flying buttresses make possible the immense, vaulted spaces that hint of freedom from the mundane. Before the Gothic style, architecture had always been limited by problems of stability and weight, and in the end it kept man down to earth; the new style made stone seem weightless: the weightless expression of mankind’s spirit.

Bernard Shaw's plays themselves—among them *Major Barbara* (1905), *Misalliance*, (1910), and *Saint Joan* (1923)—sometimes reflect the tension between gravity and ascent that makes up so much of the legacy of Christian thought. The use of these motifs should not be surprising in the work of a dramatist whom J. Percy Smith has described as “not only a profoundly religious man but a profoundly religious playwright” (74). Their presence in his plays, however, also suggests something of the inner conflict of the artist who would transcend his art—become, as it were, his own audience—at the same that he creates it. Comedy requires more detachment from life, or more objectivity toward it, than most forms of art, as many critics have observed, and Shaw's own detachment, his would-be transcendence, results in a comic style that is more remotely contemplative than directly experiential. Even at the height of emotional involvement, his characters are able to pull up short in order to speculate about their own condition or to question the nature of their next action. Not every rhetorical or “set” speech in Shaw's *oeuvre* is an instance of a character's transcendence to a higher realm of the intellect or the spirit, but these speeches nonetheless are often evidence of a schism between a character and the world of his or her play—a schism that deepens as Shaw's theory of Creative Evolution, with its own schism between Darwinism and mystical will, begins to take shape.

My purpose is not to trace Shaw's relationship with Christianity, yet I must emphasize that the theater for Shaw was more than a means toward social progress. It was, Shaw wrote in *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, “a temple of the Ascent of Man” (vi), a place “where two or three are gathered together” (22, Preface to *Major Barbara*). In the lay sermon “The New Theology,” which he delivered in London on May 16, 1907, Shaw outlined a religious hierarchy of being that has its origins in his own plays:

If there are three orders of existence—man as we know him, the angels higher than man, and God higher than the angels—why did God first create something lower than himself, the angels, and then actually create something lower than the angels, man? I cannot believe in a God who would do that. If I were God, I should try to create something higher than myself, and then something higher than that, so that, beginning with a God the higher thing in creation, I should end with a God the lowest thing in creation. (312)

This is, of course, a radical inversion of other systems of belief, but Shaw's model still retains a vertical quality. Unfortunately, as he writes further in “The New Theology,” the “continual struggle to create something higher and higher,” to make social as well as spiritual progress, has been marred by “innumerable experiments and innumerable mistakes” (313), such that

the tension between gravity and ascent has continued to inhere in human existence.

My interest here is in some of the moments in Shaw's dramaturgy, specifically in *Major Barbara*, when the balance between these two forces cannot be sustained, and the impulse toward escape or release catapults his characters upward into a realm of "otherness." Northrop Frye once discussed the movement in Shakespeare's comedies away from the normal world toward a "green world," in order that a metamorphosis can occur, and then back to the normal world, where order will be restored (182). Shaw's plays are not so tightly as this, nor are escapes in them always followed by a return to the status quo. There is also considerable variation in the tone surrounding these ruptures, which ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous. Moreover, the characters who undergo transfiguration in Shaw have a remarkable tendency to be women.

Without pausing to discuss to discuss Shaw's principle of the Divine and its connection with women, I note Barbara Watson's thesis that female characters offer themselves as mouthpieces for his ideas because they are outside the idealist world of male society; and Norbert Greiner's counter argument that woman, "because of the educational processes that she [is] subject to, adopts and realizes men's ideals" (96). In fact, what these female characters have in common is the spirit of rebellion, the original spirit of the Protest-ant (as Shaw insisted it be pronounced) that Warwick describes in Saint Joan as "the protest of the individual soul against the interference of priest or peer between the private man and his God" (108). The operative term here is "private," and it is a moot point whether these women seek privacy via escape from the tentacles of a problematic world because their traditional roles have not allowed them privacy, or whether they seek such privacy because their immersion in male ideology has give them the conviction, and the power, to demand their rights. What remains are women who, with heroic effort, lift themselves out of the morass for sometimes brief, sometimes eternal moments of transcendence.

Since I use the word "transfiguration" in my title, it is necessary now to return to Christian theology in order to define this term more completely. The story of Christ's transfiguration is told in three of the Gospels (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36) and varies little from version to version. The chief points worth noting about this event are that it begins in prayer at a high place, on a mountain, and that it grows into an intense religious experience—during which Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah and is called "Son" by a voice in the sky assumed to be God the Father—only dimly perceived by the apostles Peter, John, and James. The aura of unnatural brilliance that surrounds Christ at the moment of transfiguration

(he takes on, in all three Gospels, an “unearthly appearance”) foreshadows his appearance as the Messiah after the resurrection. But just as important as the transfiguration itself is the event’s context within Christ’s tenure on earth. The transfiguration follows directly after the feeding of the multitudes and the healing of the blind man. It is one of the few moments of meditative escape from the constant activity surrounding Christ before his entrance into Jerusalem; as soon as he descends from the mountain, he is again caught up in the sickness of the world as he is called upon to cast out the demon from an epileptic boy.

Two contrasting views of the transfiguration can be found in Fra Angelico’s and Raphael’s paintings, the one a static presentation of the event, the other a dramatic representation of it. Fra Angelico’s Christ stands on sculptured rock, surrounded by an aura of pure white, with his hands outspread in prefiguration of the crucifixion to come. His separation from the kneeling apostles here is complete, except for a downward glance that suggests his continuing attachment to the beings who cower in terror below him. This *Transfiguration* (1438-45)—painted as a fresco for an individual cell in the Monastery of San Marco—presents a single, contemplative subject from which the rest of the world is in retreat. Raphael’s *Transfiguration of Christ* (1517), by contrast, depicts both Jesus’s glory and his gloom, or the gloom that continues to pervade his life on earth. Christ is in mid-air, his arms and head raised to the heavens as if to greet the divinity above him. But down below, the windswept apostles, in the foreground, impatiently await his return as their confused gesturing envelops the demon-possessed boy and his father. The world beneath Christ in this instance is dark—only half-lit by the radiance of his transfiguration.

Raphael’s version of the transfiguration, then, more dramatically captures the eruption of the spirit toward privacy or solitude, away from the strictures of the demanding society of men. A similar moment is captured in the last scene of *Major Barbara* as the now enlightened Barbara, stripped both of her uniform and her idealism by her realist father, begins her new mission of saving human souls without the “bribe of bread” (158). Shaw describes a scene of visual contrast here: “a platform of concrete, with a firestep, and a parapet which suggests a fortification” (133), overlooks the town of Perivale St. Andrews, which is spotlessly clean and “only needs a cathedral to be a heavenly city instead of a hellish one” (133). Included in this otherwise pristine picture are the instruments of war—a huge cannon, sheds for explosives, and dummy soldiers who, “more or less mutilated, with straw protruding from their gashes” and strewn about like grotesque corpses, are constant reminders of the destructive forces controlled by the gigantic “creative” will of which Andrew Undershaft is a part.

Barbara herself stands on the firestep, “*looking over the parapet towards the town*” (133). Often during the scene she is above the action, and at one point she steps onto the mounted cannon so that her father must reach up to grasp her hand. Shaw’s placement of Barbara on the parapet and on the cannon, where she is above the earthly powers at her feet yet still connected to them, suggests the imprisonment (by her father) in a tower of the Christian saint of the same name. And it is no accident that these two Barbaras are linked, for St. Barbara is the patron saint of the hour of death and liberation from the prisonhouse of earth.

Barbara is silent in this scene until Cusins declares the circumstances of his birth, but her presence is noted by Shaw as Undershaft announces the death of 300 soldiers and follows this announcement by “*kicking a prostrate dummy brutally out of his way*” (135). At this moment Barbara and Cusins exchange glances, and when Cusins sits on the step and buries his face in his hands, “*Barbara gravely lays her hand on his shoulder*” (135) in Shaw’s stage direction. As Cusins subsequently explains his status as a foundling, Barbara climbs onto the cannon and remains there during most of what has been called “Undershaft’s apologia” (92, Otten). Only when her father takes her hands and demands a definition of power does Barbara finally confess her anxiety—how she waits in “dread and horror” (145) for the second shock of the figurative earthquake that has caused her world to reel and crumble around her.

Barbara then reverses herself by erupting with “sudden vehemence” in response to her father’s scoffing remark about her “tinpot tragedy” (145), and demands that he show her “some light through the darkness of this dreadful place” (146). Shaw has been careful throughout to present this “dreadful place” as beautiful, blemish-free, and enlightened, both in his stage directions and through Sarah’s, Stephen’s, Lomax’s, and Lady Britomart’s surprised and even possessive approval of Perivale St. Andrews. But Barbara, the divine spark in the play (Cusins declares, “I adored what was divine in her, and was therefore a true worshipper” [139]), reveals the correct perception of this gleaming factory town. Though it may bask in middle-class morality and the respectability that comes with it, Perivale St. Andrews remains the home of a dreadful factory of death and destruction. By the end of the play, though, it will have become the object of Barbara’s energy, the demonic child from which she herself will cast out the devil.

Barbara’s relative silence during this scene, in contrast with Undershaft’s and Cusins’ loquacity, suggests that her focus is turning inward. Her responses become increasingly reflective, seeming to arise out of a sedate, even somber mood—and responses like this from a character who, for the two previous acts, has been vigorously outspoken, rhetorically persuasive, and charmingly

humorous. When Lady Britomart demands that they leave, since the father of the family is obviously “wickedder than ever” (149), Barbara’s rejoinder is simple and softspoken: “It’s no use running away from wicked people, mamma” (149). The word “wicked” is repeated here, though subtly altered, as Shaw contrasts Lady Britomart’s superficial objection to Undershaft’s social behavior with Barbara’s heartfelt insight not only into her father’s character, but into the major premise of the play—that “there is no wicked side. Life is all one” (157).

In the final scene the trio of Undershaft, Barbara, and Cusins is reduced to a duet, yet Barbara’s questions and responses continue to give no hint of what her final action will be. Cusins’ own rationalized defense of his decision to join Undershaft grows more and more assertive, until his final cry is characterized by the repeated use of the first person: “Dare I make war on war? I dare. I must. I will” (152). When he then turns and asks Barbara if their relationship is over, in “*evident dread of her answer*” (according to Shaw’s stage direction [156]), she replies, “Silly baby Dolly! How could it be!” (156). She has answered Cusins’ weakness in the only way her nurturing nature will allow, but the “levity” of his response, as Shaw describes it (and which understandably would follow his previous dread) is too indelicate for the intensity of the moment. Accordingly, Barbara reacts by transcending in word and thought the “mereness” of the world: “Oh, if only I could get away from you and from father and from it all! if I could have the wings of a dove and fly away to heaven!” (156).

Barbara is thus gradually transfigured, as the pull of her mission raises her above the paltry concerns of her family and lover to reveal the agony of the soul who finally faces evil without illusions, who must endure evil “whether it be sin or suffering” (157). The second act of this play has removed the “bribe of bread” (158), and in her transfiguration in Act III Barbara dismisses the “bribe of heaven” (158), for God’s work is to be done “for its own sake” (158). Moreover, in indirect reference to the quotation above from Shaw’s unique “new theology,” Barbara vows that she will forgive God—an inversion that places her higher than the Creator, since He will now be in her debt.

Like the apostles in the Raphael painting, Cusins has become a disciple at her feet, and his question, “Then the way of life lies through the factory of death?” (158) elicits from Barbara the mystical outpouring that has puzzled so many, and that can itself be explained as a gloss on Shaw’s new hierarchy of being: “Yes, through the raising of hell to heaven and of man to God, through the unveiling of an eternal light in the Valley of The Shadow” (158). Her religious ecstasy here oddly parallels Luke’s own at the transfiguration of Christ, when he speaks of clouds, God, man, and revelation:



. . . a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. (9:34-36; 1258)

Eric Bentley once said of Vivie at the end of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893): "A soul is born" (107). A description of Barbara at the end of *Major Barbara* might be: A soul is illuminated. Fighting the limitations of the world and seeking escape through meditation, she reaches out in the end toward the eternal, only to find it in herself. Barbara's return from the metaphorical mountain (the parapet of the gun factory) results in marriage to Cusins and not only the start of a new dynasty and the continuation of the Undershaft inheritance, but also the start of new spiritual mission—proof of Shaw's abiding optimism in 1905, before world war would change him, his art, and the world forever.

\* \* \*

Death is for many of us the gate of hell; but we are inside on the way out, not outside on the way in. There fore let us give up telling one another idle stories, and rejoice in death as we rejoice in birth; for without death we cannot be born again . . .

Preface to *Misalliance*  
(10, Penguin)

When Lina Szczepanowska drops out of the sky into the Tarleton household, her perceptions become the lens through which the antics of these summer folk are judged. Without Lina, *Misalliance* would be a somewhat pointless romp through the fertility rites of an eccentric family. Shaw sets up a tension between the family's inconsequential activities and the foreign Lina's consequential actions—ones taken, that is, at the edge of existence. While they tell one another "idle stories" (10, Penguin Preface), Lina rejoices over life lived in flirtation with death. Hypatia herself complains about the continual "talk, talk, talk, talk" (44, World Library) of the Tarleton clan and wants to become an "active verb" (154, French), but her aspirations become mere lip service to a high-sounding ideal when contrasted with Lina's decisiveness, vitality, and bravery.

Lina is more than a means for perspective, however. Like Barbara, who proceeds her, and Joan, who is to follow, Lina contains the divine spark. Her development assumes a different tone from that of the other two heroines, primarily because the disquisitory nature of *Misalliance* does not permit the social drama of *Major Barbara* or the tragic *agon* of *Saint Joan*. Yet certain elements in Lina's character find their counterparts in both Barbara's and



Joan's; her contemplative side (to Summerhays's question "What is the Bible for?" she replies, "To quiet my soul" [74, World Library]), her compassion for others, and her ego, which enables her to divorce herself from the crowd. Her transfiguration is essentially comic, however, because it arises not out of a crisis of soul, but from outrage and frustration. But it is a transfiguration nonetheless and through its energy propels the play to the bursting point, where the significance of a world that, by its nature, must remain earthbound is placed in question. Her vocation is to defy gravity, as Summerhays describes: "The last time I saw that lady, she did something I should not have thought possible . . . she walked backwards along a taut wire without a balancing pole and turned a somersault in the middle" (70, World Library).

Lina's outburst, "I must get out of this into the air: right up into the blue" (137, World Library), springs from the same impulse as Barbara's more tormented cry. In only an hour, every male in the house except Percival (who has had his hands full with Hypatia) has made love to Lina. As she says, she has forgiven Tarleton because of his affection for his wife, Lord Summerhays because his position as ambassador demanded such behavior, and Bentley because of his youth and obvious weakness. All this she has borne "in silence" (138, World Library), even though she has come to regard the atmosphere of the house as "disgusting" and "not healthy" (138, World Library). But it is Johnny Tarleton's proposal—priggish, complacent, condescending—that elicits the fury and scorn of a woman who is accustomed to living in the world as an active agent, and whose privacy and honor have been violated:

This to me, Lina Szczepanowska! I am an honest woman: I earn my living. I am a free woman: I live in my own house. I am a woman of the world: I have thousands of friends: every night crowds of people applaud me, delight in me, buy my picture, pay hard-earned money to see me. I am strong: I am skillful: I am brave: I am independent: I am unbought: I am all that a woman ought to be . . . (215, French)

Coming as it does immediately after Hypatia's line "Papa, buy the brute for me" (208, French), Lina's exclamation that no one can buy her becomes a comment on the previous action. Through her eyes the children are seen as spoiled and caddish, and the older generation is regarded as garrulous and pathetic. There is no possibility for redemption for anyone here except the cowering Bentley, who vows to accompany Lina after she exhorts, "You must learn to dare" (218, French). Lina's transfiguration results, though, not in comic restoration but in her actual ascent—in an airplane. When told there may be a storm coming, she responds, "I'll go: storm or no storm. I must risk my life tomorrow" (218, French). The figurative storm that lies on the horizon of *Misalliance* suggests Shaw's growing pessimism about any reform

of the indolent, vapid upper classes—a pessimism that would culminate in *Heartbreak House* (1919). Lina cannot single-handedly cast the demon out of this society; she can save only the weakest member, then return to her circus of unbought souls.

In *Misalliance* and *Major Barbara*, the heroines break out of the confines of society but return to their respective missions: Lina will return to performing in the “otherworldly” circus, where people exhibit bravery and skill every day, and Barbara will save souls at the Undershaft factory. At the end of *Saint Joan* the status quo also returns, as the epilogue emphasizes, but it is a status quo without the heroine. Joan bursts the boundaries of the world and, in doing so, proves herself unwilling and unable to return to the society that has rejected her. The spark that illuminates Shaw’s heroines is magnified in Joan to the point where she prefers divine to human company, as she herself declares:

I see now that the loneliness of God is His strength: what would He be if He listened to your jealous little counsels? Well, my loneliness shall be my strength too: it is better to be alone with God; His friendship will not fail me, nor His counsel, nor His love. In His strength I will dare, and dare, and dare, until I die. (115)

The first three scenes of *Saint Joan* mark the ascent of Joan’s ideals—nationalism, Protestantism, and individual genius. God’s blessing is evident throughout this ascent as the natural world responds in harmony with her actions: hens lay eggs, the wind shifts, and an arrow in her throat cannot prevent Joan from winning the battle at Orléans. The next three scenes mark the decline of her ideals at the hands of the government, the Church, and other pedestrian souls. The natural world becomes crass and threatening, and by the beginning of Scene 6, physical pain is depicted on stage—something Shaw had not done in his previous plays. Joan is weak from imprisonment, ill from bad food, her feet are chained to a block of wood, and the instruments of torture have been shown to her. She suggests that she is a caged bird:

D’ESTIVET. You tried to escape?

JOAN. Of course I did; and not for the first time either. If you leave the door of the cage open the bird will fly out. (122)

This, of course, is an image that fits Barbara and Lina as well as Joan, but it is crueler and more hopeless in Joan’s case.

It is the pain of death by fire that confronts Joan, finally. Her flesh naturally shrinks from flame: “I have dared and dared; but only a fool will walk into a fire” (126). At the moment she signs the recantation, Shaw describes her as

“tormented by the rebellion of her soul against her mind and body” (127). The glorious simplicity of Joan as a child of God, pursuing nearly impossible goals with unbroken confidence and through direct communication with her own divinity, is thus destroyed by the scratch of a pen. At the sentence of life in prison, however, her body and mind rejoin her soul. In her moment of transfiguration she rejects the cage and, with it, the world:

His ways are not your ways. He wills that I go through the fire to His bosom; for I am His child, and you are not fit that I should live among you. That is my last word to you. (128)

Like Barbara, Joan goes “right up into the skies” (158, *Major Barbara*), but, unlike the major, her soul’s impulse to escape confinement cannot be tempered by love, marriage, and good works. As Lavendu takes the cross from her sight on the lighted pyre, Joan looks up to heaven and utters her final word, to God. Ascent follows, with only her unsinged heart left behind.

Charles Krauthammer has written that “among the purposes of remembrance are pedagogy (for those who were not there) and solace (for those too much there). But the highest aim of remembrance (for us, here) is redemption” (90). Christ asked that the Last Supper be held “in remembrance of Me”; and the Eucharist celebrates the redemption of mankind as well as Christ’s memory. Shaw’s play about the young woman from Lorraine is neither pedagogical, consolatory, nor redemptive. Saint Joan is not so much remembrance as testament that, after hundreds of years of so-called civilization, the world is still trapped in the Dark Ages of misery and persecution. Joan asks, “Must I burn again?” (137), and Shaw’s answer between the two world wars was a profound, despairing “yes.”

Maurice Valency has noted that Shaw shares with Strindberg and Ibsen an interest in the tragic dilemma “of the extraordinary individual in a world of ordinary people” (381). The cry with which Joan ends the play, “How long, O Lord, how long?” (138), is at the core of modern tragic thought, for her *agon* results from the disparity she perceives between herself and the world. And the sinking of Joan’s heart to the bottom of the river with the rest of Rouen’s garbage is a metaphor for Shaw’s dark belief that this world is governed by waste. Despite the tendency of the spirit in *Saint Joan*, *Major Barbara*, *Misalliance*, and other plays by Shaw to fight gravity through transfiguration and ascent, to achieve moments of blissful weightlessness, it must finally return, like Raphael’s Christ, to a world that crucifies and burns those who would lead it to salvation.

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## “Parallelism and Divergence: The Case of Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, and the Dream Play”

It is surprising that significant parallels should exist between plays as dissimilar as *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (written 1941; first produced 1956)—the one a “laughing” as opposed to “tearful” or sentimental comedy, written by an Anglo-Irishman, the other an American tragedy composed by an Irish American. The most obvious parallel involves the “cook-maid” in the two works. She is called Bridget in both, does not appear on stage in either, and has an all-around function in each household. In Goldsmith’s play Bridget is the “cook-maid” for the Hardcastles, who live in the country and do not have so much money that they can hire a servant for each chore or one so skilled that he or she should perform only one task. (After Marlow asks that the cook be called, Hardcastle describes Bridget as the *cook-maid*, implying that her duties go beyond the preparation of food.) In O’Neill’s play Bridget is the “first girl,” a combination cook and maid, for the Tyrones. James Tyrone, the father, is cheap, so he naturally does not hire a servant for each chore: he hires the “Irish peasants” Bridget and Cathleen, her assistant or the “second girl,” to perform all the tasks around the house.

The parallels between the two cook-maids go beyond name and function: these two Bridgets have similar characters. In *She Stoops to Conquer* Hardcastle says to Marlow, who wants the cook called so that he can order a special supper: “Our Bridget, the cook-maid, is not very communicative upon these occasions. Should we send for her, she might scold us all out of the house” (36). What Hardcastle implies is that his Bridget, being lazy, becomes cantankerous when the family has guests and she must work harder. (She will become even more cantankerous when she learns that Marlow does not want to eat what she is cooking for everyone else.)

Bridget in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is herself lazy and cantankerous. Mary Tyrone says of her at one point, “I must see the cook about dinner and the day’s marketing. Bridget is so lazy” (29). At another point Mary stereotypes her Irish immigrant of a cook-maid a “stupid, lazy greenhorn” (61). Because Bridget is lazy, she becomes irate when she has cooked a meal and James Tyrone is late to eat it, as is his habit, or when Cathleen isn’t in the kitchen to help her prepare the food. To Edmund, the younger son, Cathleen says of Bridget, “It’s a wonder your father wouldn’t look at his watch once in a while. He’s a devil for making the meals late, and then Bridget curses me as if

I was to blame” (51). Mary speaks similarly of the “first girl” to Tyrone: “I’ve had to calm down Bridget. She’s in a tantrum over your being late again, and I don’t blame her” (66). After the lonely Mary has fed Cathleen drinks for a long time in Act III, in order to have someone to talk to, the “second girl” asks, “Can I take a drink to Bridget, Ma’am? It must be near dinner-time and I ought to be in the kitchen helping her. If she don’t get something to quiet her temper, she’ll be after me with the cleaver” (106). Mary, who herself does not drink, plies Cathleen and Bridget with liquor, just as Marlow, who is a teetotaler, plies his servants with it in *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Bridget in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is talkative; Mary says, “She begins telling me about her relatives so I can’t get a word in edgeways and scold her [for neglecting her work]” (29). Hardcastle tells his servant, “You must not be so talkative, Diggory. You must be all attention to the guests. You must hear us talk, and not think of talking” (27). Hardcastle thus admonishes Diggory, not only because the latter is a servant, but also because the master himself likes to do all the talking whether he is in the company of his servants or his peers. He can expatiate on any subject, but he especially likes to tell war stories: “Your talking of a retreat, Mr. Marlow, puts me in mind of the Duke of Marlborough, when we went to besiege Denain . . .” (33). Hardcastle shares the trait of garrulousness with James Tyrone. Jamie reveals that his father loves “listening to himself talk” (54); and Cathleen confirms this when she reports to Mary, “I went down to Mister Tyrone, like you ordered, and he said he’d come right away, but he kept on talking to that man [Captain Turner], telling him of the time when—” (62).

Hardcastle shares additional traits with James Tyrone. The former seems to be cheap, and he likes the isolation of the country. Mrs. Hardcastle complains to him, “Here we live in an old rumbling mansion, that looks for all the world like an inn, but that we never see company” (10-11). Mary Tyrone makes similar complaints about her husband: “It’s just as well we haven’t any friends here [she describes their home as “this shabby place” (61); Edmund calls it “this summer dump” (141)]. I’d be ashamed to have them step in the door. But he’s never wanted family friends. He hates calling on people, or receiving them” (44).

Like Hardcastle, Tyrone prefers old things, as much because he is contemptuous of the modern and nostalgic for the past (when he still had the chance to be an actor of artistic stature but chose instead merely to become a financially secure matinee idol, playing the same role over and over again) as because he is cheap. Tyrone’s clothing at the start of the play “is commonplace shabby. He believes in wearing his clothes to the limit of usefulness, is dressed now for gardening” (13). He buys a secondhand car, claiming “it’s better than any of the new ones!” (84). His books “have



the look of having been read and reread" (11), and contain the following "old" titles among them: Hume and Smollett's *History of England*, Thiers's *History of the Consulate and Empire*, Gibbon's *Roman Empire*, and three sets of Shakespeare. His sons' library, by contrast, contains "new" volumes (the play is set in 1912): works, for example, by Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Wilde, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, and Engels. Not only does Hardcastle, for his part, love his "old rumbling mansion"; he also loves "everything that's old: old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine" (11).

James Tyrone is a New York actor as well as a touring one who retires to New London, Connecticut (then considered the country), every summer to play the squire. He has tenants who farm his land and he buys as much property as he can afford, claiming—less as a landed aristocrat than as the third son of victims of the Irish potato famine (in 1845, two years before Tyrone's birth) who gave up what land they had in order to emigrate to the United States—that "banks fail, and your money's gone, but you . . . can keep land beneath your feet" (146). Like an affable country gentleman, Tyrone stops his gardening in front of the house to bow to passersby and chat with friends. Hardcastle is a squire, and is dedicated to his family. Unlike Tyrone, he is not, as his stepson Tony Lumpkin describes him, "a Gentleman . . . [who is] for giving [others] his company . . ." (26); he gives Marlow his company only because the latter is to become his son-in-law. Tyrone, unlike Hardcastle, does not give his company to his family easily, just as Mary, Edmund, and Jamie do not easily give theirs to him or to one another.

It is difficult to say with certainty whether O'Neill wrote *Long Day's Journey into Night* with elements of *She Stoops to Conquer* consciously in mind. After all, "Bridget" was the first name of his maternal grandmother as well as of the cook-maid in Goldsmith's play. Moreover, domestic service in America had become so identified with the Irish during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that maids were often referred to generically as "Bridgets" or "Cathleens" (Quinn, 50), like Tyrone's two "girls"—particularly since they were frequently unmarried or married later in life. Parallels between Goldsmith's play and O'Neill's do exist, however, and I am interested more in the different uses to which the two playwrights put the same elements than in arguing the question of influence.

Bridget, for example, has a different function in *Long Day's Journey into Night* than she has in *She Stoops to Conquer*. In the O'Neill play, Bridget can be seen as another Mary, as Egil Törnqvist has pointed out:

The fog affects Bridget's rheumatism as it does Mary's (41, 99). And she appears to be as much of a whiskey addict as Mary is a "dope fiend." Their desperation, made acute—or rather symbolized—by

their bodily pain, stems . . . from an intense feeling of loneliness. In Act I Bridget, who needs company, keeps Mary in the kitchen for a long while with “lies about her relations” (102). . . .

Cathleen describes Bridget as little better than a maniac, who cannot stand being left alone: “she’s like a raging devil. She’ll bite my head off” (99). . . . Never appearing but always (since we are constantly reminded of her presence in the dialogue and in the exits to the kitchen) lurking in the background, she comes to personify the reckless, destructive impulse within Mary, which finally “kills” her three men. (Törnqvist, 240)

Bridget reinforces the tragedy of the play, then. Bridget in *She Stoops to Conquer* reinforces the play’s comedy; she does this through contrast rather than analogy, the device employed in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. She is not very communicative when she has to cook and clean for guests as well as for the family; her master, Hardcastle, is so talkative in part because he has little to do. Because he likes to talk so much and doesn’t listen properly to Marlow and his friend Hastings, he never realizes that they speak to him as if he were an innkeeper instead of Kate’s father: thus does this comedy of disguise take wing. Tyrone, by comparison, because he loves to hear himself talk, does not really talk to his family and thereby helps to precipitate his and their tragedy; his garrulousness derives from self-absorption more than from a need to substitute talk for work (although Tyrone, the would-be squire, shares this need to some extent with Hardcastle), whereas the reverse is true for Hardcastle, for whom talk is a way to occupy himself, almost to forget himself. One could say that, in her isolation and the garrulousness that results from it, Bridget is another Tyrone as well as another Mary—indeed, could be seen as the double of any member of the Tyrone family.

If the two Bridgets reinforce the tragedy and the comedy of their respective plays, then Mary and Marlow, in their reasons for dispensing alcohol so freely, do the same. Tragically isolated, Mary bribes Cathleen with her husband’s liquor so that she will have an audience while she talks at length about her past. Mary then supplies Bridget with drink so she will not mind slaving in the kitchen while her helper sits idle and captive in the living room. Mary will cover up her theft of Tyrone’s liquor by playing “Jamie’s trick. . . . Just measure a few drinks of water and pour them in” (100). Marlow, who is to be comically reconciled with the Hardcastle family eventually, orders his servants “not to spare [Hardcastle’s] cellar. . . . My positive directions were, that as I did not drink myself, they should make up for my deficiencies below” (73). Marlow, mistaking Hardcastle’s home for an inn and in a merry mood over his anticipated conquest of the barmaid (really Kate Hardcastle

in disguise), openly orders his servants *away* from him, to drink their fill and be happy. When Hardcastle confronts him with his servants' drunkenness, Marlow freely admits his responsibility for it.

Finally, what is true of Mary's and Marlow's dispensing of drink is equally true of Tyrone's and Hardcastle's love of the old. Tyrone's is in part a love of the cheap, as I have noted, and is as responsible for his family's tragedy as anything else. For instance, his engaging the cheaper hotel doctor rather than a private physician to attend to his wife after Edmund's birth led to her morphine addiction since this "ignorant quack" (Mary's words, 87) was happier to prescribe strong drugs for Mary's pain and be done with her than to discover the cause of her suffering and treat it. Jamie tells his father that Edmund might never have got consumption "if you'd sent him to a real doctor when he first got sick" (30), instead of to Hardy, "a cheap old quack" (30). Hardcastle's love of the old is itself in part a love of the cheap, and is responsible for the second mistaken identity in this comedy, which is subtitled *The Mistakes of a Night*. The first mistaken identity occurs when Marlow and Hastings take Tony Lumpkin for a bumpkin after meeting him at an alehouse, instead of recognizing him as a squire. They follow his directions to Hardcastle's house, which they mistake for the inn that Tony mischievously tells them it is, because the house is "antique." (Their actual destination is Hardcastle's home, to which they intend to journey after they leave the "inn," and where Marlow is supposed to meet Kate, whom his father has chosen as a wife for him.) It has undergone "the usual fate of a large mansion," says Marlow. "Having first ruined the master by good housekeeping, it at last comes to levy contributions as an inn" (29). Hardcastle's house no longer looks like a mansion and he is unwilling to spend the money to make it look like one again.

The disguises in *She Stoops to Conquer* are worn inadvertently, as in the case of the house "disguised" as an inn or of Hardcastle himself (Tony fools Marlow and Hastings into thinking that his stepfather is an innkeeper, and they assume from his appearance that he is one); or they are worn intentionally but in everyone's best interests, as in the example of Kate, who poses first as a barmaid, then as a "poor relation" of the Hardcastles, in order to test Marlow's suitability for marriage. The disguises worn and gradually stripped away in *Long Day's Journey into Night*—Mary's disguise of her drug problem and of the reasons for it, most obviously; and Tyrone's disguise of his cheapness as mere sensible thrift, whereas it is actually excessive fear of the extreme poverty he knew as a boy—are in each instance self-imposed, may be unconsciously worn (as in Tyrone's case), and, though designed to be self-protective, they have destroyed the self and with it the family. (And this is a family that already exists apart from—or, by today's standard, moves in step

with?—the mainstream of American society, without any permanent home, with few friends, with no relatives to speak of, and more or less without the spiritual bulwark of the Catholic faith: the price the Tyrones have had to pay for their assimilation to the States and their simultaneous divorce from the bonds of blood, community, religion, and culture of even famine-afflicted Ireland.) The physical disguise of comedy is a means to an end, and is easily removed to the reconciliation and happiness of everyone. The spiritual disguise of tragedy is an end in itself—it is a way of being—and is arduously removed to the recognition and misery of all.

Indeed, the action of the otherwise naturalistic *Long Day's Journey into Night*—proceeding from 8:30 in the morning until some time after midnight of the same day—can be seen as a kind of nightmare of drugs, alcohol and recrimination from which the characters wish they could easefully awaken. It is while the three men *sleep* the night before that mother Mary, pacing in the spare room, worries about her son Edmund's illness and considers returning to morphine for comfort. Moreover, at least two passages in the play make explicit the idea that life is a bad dream from which man will completely awaken only when he dies, if then. The first is by Edmund, who “quotes from Dowson sardonically”:

“They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,  
Love and desire and hate:  
I think they have no portion in us after  
We pass the gate.

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:  
Out of a misty dream  
Our path emerges for a while, then closes  
Within a dream.” (130; from the 1896 poem by Ernest Dowson titled  
“Vitae Summa Brevis”)

The second passage is delivered, soon after, by James, who quotes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* “using his fine voice”: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep” (131).

The dream play, as a genre, dates back at least to *The Tempest* (1611) and Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* (1635), both from the seventeenth century; continues in the nineteenth with Grillparzer's own *Life Is a Dream* (1834); and reaches fruition in the early twentieth century with Strindberg's *To Damascus* (Parts I & II, 1898), *A Dream Play* (1901), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). Even Strindberg's naturalistic *Miss Julie* (1888), however—unlike the three aforementioned works, not normally thought of as a dream play—features, in addition to such non-naturalistic elements as ballet, mime, and a musical

interlude, the narration of two dreams in which the playwright, anticipating Freud, locates the very life-drives of his central characters, Jean the valet and Julie the aristocrat. *Miss Julie* takes place on Midsummer Eve (June 23<sup>rd</sup>, close to the longest day of the year), when daylight persists throughout the night and the country folk enjoy an annual bacchanalia, which makes the play a sort of tragic *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605).

*Long Day's Journey into Night*, written by the man who had long since become Strindberg's most passionate and self-conscious American disciple, takes place in August 1912—the first week of August, by my reckoning, since that would literally place it at midsummer and thus connect it with Strindberg's midsummer tragedy as well as Shakespeare's midsummer comedy. (The Scandinavian as well as British “midsummer,” June 24<sup>th</sup> [Midsummer Day]—the feast of John the Baptist, the forerunner and baptizer of Jesus—is not popularly celebrated in the United States; but neither is August 15<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Assumption of Mary, the mother of Jesus, into heaven after her death, and the day toward which *Long Day's Journey into Night* points, given Mary Tyrone's oft-stated if now lapsed faith in the Blessed Virgin [see 94, 107, 121 and 176, for example].)

The works of both Shakespeare and Strindberg are included in the Tyrone library (11), as previously indicated, and, although *Long Day's Journey into Night* (in contrast to *She Stoops to Conquer*) is dominated by tragedy, O'Neill's play does have its share of comic moments, not least of which are the repeated sight and sound of the three alcohol-addicted male Tyrones bemoaning Mary's relapse into drug addiction. Several characters in the play enjoy a midsummer bacchanalia of sorts in the then-country town of New London: Jamie goes to drink and consort with the prostitute Fat Violet, while Tyrone and Edmund settle for whiskey alone, as do the servants Bridget and Cathleen (who resists the advances of the chauffeur Smythe between Acts II and III, but who, at the start of Act III, “consorts” with her morphine-besotted mistress, Mary).

But this midsummer day-cum-night is almost wholly one of lamenting rather than celebration, and the play's tragic or mournful tone is suggested by the fact that it takes place during the dog days of summer, the uncomfortably hot, stagnant period between mid-July and September. That sorrowful tone is also suggested by the content of the characters' dreams. Mary says she had had two dreams as a convent-school girl, before she met and fell in love with James Tyrone: “To be a nun, that was the more beautiful one. To become a concert pianist, that was the other” (104). Mary chose the actor Tyrone over the Lord Jesus and gradually lost the great religious faith that might have comforted her during the pain of bearing the future artist Edmund, and during the unhappiness of being married to the matinée idol James. As for

her musical art, it too was sacrificed to the acting-art-become-ham-artifice of her husband. At play's end, Mary "stares before her in a sad dream" (176) of what might have been had she denied herself and dedicated her life to Christ or art, as her husband sits beside her, holding in his arms the wedding gown she has given over to him.

Edmund, too, has a recurring dream: of union with Nature, of dissolution of the self, of belonging to the universe as opposed to feeling isolated inside one's own body and mind. He has occasionally felt this longing/belonging at sea (see his speech on 153-154), but never on land, and he knows that he, like the rest of humanity, will achieve it once and for all only in death. Or through his art, which at this stage in his career is limited to "a few poems in a hick town newspaper" (163), but which will achieve immortality in the plays he, or his alter ego Eugene O'Neill, is to write from 1920 to 1943. One of those plays, of course, is *Long Day's Journey into Night*, in which Edmund reincarnates the character of the young O'Neill as imagined by an older Eugene, the mature playwright himself, soon to begin his own long descent into the darkness of death, or the sleep of dreams. This descent, in some ways, would be relieved only by the one comedy O'Neill wrote, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), a play he dreamed one night in September 1932 and that itself bears so many similarities to *Long Day's Journey* that it can be called a comic mirror-image of this great American tragedy.

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## 8. RE-EVALUATION AND INFLUENCE.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “What is the place of a play in a dramatist’s *oeuvre* and in the canon of Euro-American drama generally, and to what extent did this play influence other works by its author or has it influenced subsequent works by other playwrights?”

### “The Pillar of Ibsenian Drama: Henrik Ibsen and *Pillars of Society*, Reconsidered”

#### I. Introduction

*Pillars of Society* is the most ignored of the dozen major Ibsen prose plays. Written between 1875 and 1877, it was an immediate success and made Ibsen the champion of radical artists and social reformers throughout Europe, especially in Germany. Within four months of its publication in October 1877, it was being performed simultaneously at five different theaters in Berlin alone; within a year it had been produced by twenty-seven German-speaking theaters, besides productions in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. *Pillars of Society* remained part of the standard Ibsen repertory through the first several decades of the twentieth century and was produced a number of times in England and America. But it is rarely presented in English today. Indeed, to take a prominent example, the American Conservatory Theater’s revival of the play in 1974 was the first major American production of it in over half a century.

Critically the play has fared no better. *Pillars of Society* was the work that got William Archer excited about Ibsen, and it was the first Ibsen play to be translated into English—by Archer—but a few years after his translation he declared that British theater audiences had grown so advanced and enlightened that “the play already seemed commonplace and old-fashioned” (Archer, xviii). Most modern critics seem to agree, by default if nothing else. To wit: no major critical essay or article on the play has been published in several decades, and even full-length books on Ibsen usually either pass over it entirely or grudgingly accept it as another one in the long bumbling series of

Ibsen's "apprenticeship plays." Again and again we hear the same litany of complaints that includes its "creaky plot," its improbabilities, its psychologically unjustified final reversal, its superficial idealism—all colored, of course, by our glib, liberal self-assurance that modern, enlightened contemporary Western society is leagues beyond the short-sighted, conservative, repressed, hypocritical world presented in the play. Moreover, *Pillars of Society* is still approached as a "problem play" in the narrowest definition of that term. (Writing about Shaw—and, as it were, speaking for him—J. L. Styan was correct in pointing out that, actually, all good plays are "problem" plays [125].) From this point of view, the meaning of the play indeed becomes simplistic, i.e., that bourgeois society is hypocritical and its leaders are often corrupt. But, as Horatio advised Hamlet long ago, "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this" (I.v.129-130; 1686).

Ibsen worked longer (over two years) on *Pillars of Society* than on any of his twenty-six plays; five rough drafts of it survive, more than of any other drama of his. Upon its completion, Ibsen said that *Pillars of Society* was "of all my works the one composed with the greatest artistry" (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 430). Far from being an apprenticeship play, then, it is the mature work of a dramatic genius on which he brought all his imaginative powers to bear—the first time, in fact, that Ibsen's manifold creative talents become totally fused in the same work.

## II. The Road to *Pillars of Society*

*Pillars of Society* is the first of the twelve-play series of realistic plays referred to by Ibsen himself as his "prose cycle," which he regarded as a single dramatic entity unto itself. It was immediately preceded by the play Ibsen considered his masterpiece, the massive *Emperor and Galilean* (1873). *Emperor and Galilean*, subtitled "a world-historical drama" (*Oxford Ibsen*, IV, 195), deals with the fourth-century A.D. Roman emperor Julian the Apostate, who disavowed the official state religion, Christianity, and tried to reestablish the worship of Dionysus and other pagan deities. The conflict of the play, as outlined below by Julian, is the struggle between Dionysus (the First Empire) and Christ (the Second Empire):

All human emotions have been forbidden since that day the seer of Galilee began to rule the world. With him, to live is to die. To love and hate are to sin. But has he changed man's flesh and blood? Is man still not earthbound as before? With every healthy fiber of our being we revolt against it; . . . and yet we are told to will against our own will! Thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt! (*Oxford Ibsen*, IV, 309)

Julian tries to grab hold of the reins of history but is crushed between two monolithic imperatives, each of which makes absolute and contradictory demands. The dialectic is not resolved, and no synthesis emerges; the resolution of this great world-historical dialectic will be the Third Empire, for which the world is still waiting. *Emperor and Galilean* is the dead center of Ibsen's dramaturgy. In fact, one could say that the entire prose cycle is a rewriting of this single play, on a seemingly lesser scale but still featuring conflicting categorical imperatives that are in the end irreconcilable. Put another way, *Emperor and Galilean* is Ibsen's Dantesque *Divina Commedia* (1472) and the prose cycle his Balzacian *Comédie Humaine* (1799-1850). (Interestingly, the play was published in the same year as Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.)

At first glance, *Emperor and Galilean* and *Pillars of Society* seem worlds apart. *Emperor and Galilean* is written in ten acts (it is over 250 pages long in some published texts), employs ten different settings, a cast of over seventy parts plus dozens of supernumeraries, and is set in ancient times. Moreover, although mainly prose, its language is consciously poetic and far removed from that spoken in real life. No wonder that most critics address the two plays, when they address them at all, as if they were the works of two different playwrights. The point, however, is that they were written by the same man.

Some features of *Emperor and Galilean* that are integral to an understanding of Ibsen's dramaturgy should be noted. It is a work of immense scope: its dramatic axis is the collision of world orders and systems of values. The play presents the moral and social consciousness of man, not as something fore-ordained or established in a system of immutable value, but as something that changes and evolves through the resolution of contradiction—that is, through dialectics or, in dramatic terms, conflict. Finally, in a dramatic text that is already highly referential or allusive, the setting and design are time and again overtly symbolic, metaphorical, or even allegorical.

After completing *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen returned to Norway in July 1874 for the first time in a decade and stayed for almost nine months. He had become a celebrity in his homeland. After a performance of *The League of Youth* (1869), he was honored by the students of Oslo with a torchlight procession through the streets that included songs, a poem composed for the occasion, and speeches. This event may well have inspired the final scene of *Pillars of Society*. It was at this rally where he made his famous declaration that the task of the poet was "to see, not to reflect," which he repeated in 1871 in a letter to Georg Brandes (*Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen*, 215). In the spring of 1875 Ibsen left Norway for Germany, where he saw a production of Björnson's *The Bankrupt* (1875). In this play, as in *The Editor* (1874), Björnson had abandoned verse and historical drama to write a contemporary social

problem play that questioned the hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Ibsen would follow the artistic lead of his fellow countryman, but in the process he would “up the ante” considerably,

In 1875, as Ibsen grappled with the problem of form, he was in the middle of his career. He had written fourteen plays, all but one either totally or partially in verse, and over seventy poems. Although he was no longer active in the practical theater, he had directed over 100 plays and done the set and costume designs for dozens of others. But Ibsen was concerned that he was losing touch with the modern theater. *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) themselves had not been written for the stage, and no one would even consider a production of *Emperor and Galilean* for over twenty years. As he sought to find the future direction of his work, in 1875 Ibsen wrote his last two poems of any length, “Song of Greeting to Sweden” and a rhymed letter written for the wedding of the son of Frederik Hegel, Ibsen’s publisher. Here is a short excerpt from each, both, significantly, touching on the theme of the new or the future:

Spring-songs, newly turned and cheering  
    through our times now wend; —  
singers must be keen of hearing,  
    heed what they portend.  
Our blithe song-birds are the youngsters;  
    in the people’s view  
it’s the singer’s task amongst us to sing in the new.  
    (“Song of Greeting to Sweden,” *Collected Poems*, 278)

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Look, my dear friend, “Europa” puts to sea  
full steam ahead for some new destination,  
and we’ve bought tickets, booked for you and me  
a space up on the poop-deck’s privacy. (“A Verse Letter,” *Collected Poems*, 275)

Next Ibsen set to work on his new play, *Pillars of Society*, a serious drama in prose set in contemporary times, which he said would be “new and appropriate to the present day in every respect” (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 430). The most difficult and important decision of his literary career, Ibsen’s resolve to abandon verse was based largely on his belief that verse and a literary vocabulary were no longer functional in the modern theater. In an 1883 letter to the actress Lucie Wolf he would write that for verse he could “scarcely find any application worth mentioning in the drama” (*Oxford Ibsen*, VI, 439), and that “the poetic objectives of the future will surely not be reconcilable with

it" (*Oxford Ibsen*, VI, 439). In this same letter he advised this same actress that "a true artist of the stage, whose repertoire is the contemporary drama, should not be willing to let a single line of verse cross her lips" (*Ibsen and Meaning*, 369)—quite a declaration from the author of *Love's Comedy* (1862), *Brand*, and *Peer Gynt*.

The choice of dramatic realism and a language close to the vernacular denied Ibsen the lexicon of the great dramatic poets who had preceded him. Instead of traditional poetic diction, Ibsen sought to formulate a new poetic vocabulary rooted in the modern theater and suited to dramatic realism—a poetry of things or objects, let us say, more than words. He would have to bring every element of the theater to bear in order to create this new theatrical poetry: the set, stage directions, props, costumes, and lighting as well as the actual spoken lines of the text and the subtextual or unspoken dialogue that would often lie beneath it.

Ibsen had first started thinking about the play that would eventually become *Pillars of Society* after he had completed *The League of Youth*, a Scribean satirical comedy about contemporary politics. In 1870 he wrote the preliminary notes for a new contemporary comedy: "the theme of the thing generally must be that of women's modest position in society amongst all the bustle of the men and their petty aims" (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 424). These notes turned into a three-page outline, which he put aside when he started working on *Emperor and Galilean*. Ibsen returned to this outline in 1875, and for a year and a half he worked meticulously on the new play. In 1876, while laboring over the fourth draft of *Pillars of Society*, Ibsen went to Berlin to see the Meiningen Company's acclaimed production of his play *The Pretenders* (written in 1863, immediately before *Brand*). Even though this drama is set in Norway's Viking past, he was struck by the company's use of three-dimensional realistic scenery, their advanced staging techniques, and their prototypical deployment of ensemble playing. Ibsen was not often pleased when he saw his own plays performed, but he called this production "brilliant and spectacular" (*Plays of Ibsen*, II, 128). George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, invited the playwright to visit him and study the Company's work in closer detail, which Ibsen did that summer. When he returned to Munich, he scrapped his last working draft of *Pillars of Society*, which called for four different settings, and rewrote the play for a single set.

Ibsen drew on many real-life parallels for the play. The small coastal town in Norway where the action takes place is modeled on Grimstad, where Ibsen had worked for six years as a young man. Edmund Gosse described the town (with a population of less than a thousand) as "a small, isolated, melancholy place, connected with nothing at all, visitable only by steamer" (10). The *Palm Tree* in the play was an actual Grimstad ship, and Karsten Bernick

was based on the Grimstad shipping and business tycoon Morten Smith-Petersen. Aune, Bernick's foreman, was very likely drawn from the radical labor organizer Marcus Thrane, whom Ibsen had met. The character of Lona Hessel (Mrs. Bernick's elder half-sister) was suggested by Aasta Hansteen, who herself was involved in the struggle for Women's Emancipation. The practice of superficially patching up unseaworthy ships, insuring them to the hilt, and then sending them out to sea in the hope of their sinking was a common way for shipowners to "cut their losses." This dubious practice received a lot of attention in the press during Ibsen's nine-month stay in Norway in 1874, and the issue reached the level of an international scandal in July 1875, when Samuel Plimsoll unleashed a savage attack in England's Parliament on the "murderers" and "scoundrels" (Lavery, 230-231) who employed such tactics.

Before going further, let me summarize the action of *Pillars of Society* for those who do not know or remember the play. Karsten Bernick is the most prominent businessman in a small coastal town in Norway, with interests in shipping and shipbuilding in a long-established family firm. Now he is planning his most ambitious project yet, backing a railway that will connect the town to the main rail line and open up a fertile valley that he has been secretly buying up. But suddenly Bernick's past comes back to haunt him. Johan Tønnesen, his wife's younger brother, returns from America to the town he fled fifteen years earlier. At the time it was thought he had tried to escape with money stolen from the Bernick family business, as well as to avoid a scandal connected with his affair with an actress. But none of this was true. He left town to take the blame for Bernick, who was the one who had actually been having the affair and was nearly caught with the actress. Besides, there was no money for Johan to take, since at the time the Bernick firm was almost bankrupt.

With Tønnesen from America comes his half-sister Lona, who once loved and was loved by Bernick. But he rejected her and married his current wife for money so that he could rebuild the family business. In the years since Tønnesen left, the town has cultivated ever-greater rumors of his wickedness, helped by Bernick's studious refusal to reveal the truth of the matter. This particular dramatic potion only needs a spark to explode, and it gets one when Tønnesen falls in love with young Dina Dorf, who is the daughter of the actress involved in the scandal of fifteen years ago, and who now lives as a charity case in the Bernick household. Tønnesen demands that Bernick tell the girl the truth; Bernick refuses. When Tønnesen then says he will go back to the United States to clear up his affairs and then come back to town to marry Dina, Bernick sees his chance to get out of this mess of his own making.



His yard is repairing an American ship, the *Indian Girl*, which is deeply unseaworthy. Bernick orders his yard foreman to finish the work by the next day, even if it means sending the ship and its crew to certain death, because he wants Tønnesen to die on board. That way Bernick will be free of any danger of exposure in the future. But matters do not work out quite in the way he wants. Tønnesen runs off with Dina on board another ship that is safe, leaving word that he will be back. And Bernick's young son stows away on the *Indian Girl*, thereby seemingly heading for certain death. Bernick discovers that his plot has gone disastrously wrong on the very night the people of the town have gathered to honor him for his contribution to the city.

The whole of the action in *Pillars of Society* is thus set up for a tragic conclusion, but suddenly Ibsen pulls back from the brink. The yard foreman gets an attack of conscience and rows out to stop the *Indian Girl* from heading to almost certain disaster at sea; Bernick's son is brought back safely by his mother; and Bernick addresses the community, telling them most of the truth and getting away with his sins of the past. His wife even greets the news that he married her only for money as a sign there is now some hope for their marriage.

### III. *Pillars of Society*

In a single stroke *Pillars of Society* transformed the Western stage and moved bourgeois drama onto a new level and into an entirely new frame of reference. Although the specifics of its action are extremely particularized and the characters fully-drawn psychologically, the scope of the drama is huge in its implications and resonances. Remember, Ibsen had said that the mission of the poet was "to see, not to reflect" (*Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen*, 215). His purpose was not to create yet another version of bourgeois mimesis, but to use the stage itself as metaphor; dramatic realism in this case was not the aesthetic end, but the means. I wish to clarify this statement through a close examination of the first few scenes of the play.

The setting is the garden-room in the home of Bernick the shipbuilder. There are large glass doors and windows upstage through which a spacious garden is visible. Beyond the garden is a fence and "a street, on the far side of which is a row of small, gaily painted timber houses" (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 23), where we can get a glimpse of "people going about in the heat of the day, sweating and straining over their petty affairs" (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 26), as the schoolmaster Rørlund describes the scene. The room is only partially lit by the bright, early afternoon sunshine coming from outside. On stage a group of the town's civic-minded women is sewing clothes for distribution to the poor. Even though it is warm and sunny outside—a rare thing in Norway—

everyone is seated inside. During the scene the curtains are even drawn such that the room is lit solely by artificial light. Rørlund stands reciting aloud from a book; and upstage in the garden, young Olaf (the Bernicks' thirteen-year-old son) runs around playing with a toy crossbow, a weapon suggestive of Norway's Viking past.

Within the first few lines of the play, Aune, who is almost an out-and-out socialist, tries to get in to see Bernick and argues with Krap (Bernick's confidential clerk) about his right to do as he pleases in his "free time," which leads to a hackneyed discussion about the very notion of freedom. Rørlund himself praises the small community for its moral fiber, its faith in the old, traditional values, and its resistance to the new and immoral ideas running rampant in the world outside, which has "no moral foundation under its feet" (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 25). Throughout the scene we hear muffled voices coming from Bernick's inner office. Finally, the "pillars" of this particular society, Bernick and the merchants Rummel, Sandstad, and Vigeland, come slinking out of the smoke-filled room. From this moment on, the contradictions in this society become more and more visible, and they are exposed by Ibsen with ferocious irony as well as uncanny accuracy.

The world of the play creates a microcosm of Norwegian society, and, appropriately for the first play in a prose cycle that will explore the nature of human consciousness, the inhabitants of this society operate on the most primitive level of social and ethical consciousness. It is not that people here do not have good intentions, or that they never take moral action. This is not so much an immoral world as an amoral one; and before there can be morality, there must be the consciousness of morality. Henry James himself praised *Pillars of Society* for "its large, dense complexity of moral cross-references . . ." (252), but the society the play depicts happens to be a sub-ethical "community of animals" (as Hegel described the most primitive level of human social consciousness; see Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 41-43).

Yet bear in mind that the play depicts *bourgeois* society, which, perhaps more than any other segment, seeks to re-create the world in its own image or likeness. It considers itself, not just one of many potential ways of structuring society, but the absolute pinnacle of all human thought and development. In an act of self-preservation, bourgeois society creates a mythos, an idealized image of itself that progressively has less and less to do with reality. In the process language is turned on its head, and vocabulary becomes little more than just another bourgeois manifestation or extension of itself. Thus, blatant, unrestrained economic exploitation is called "free trade," acts of naked military aggression become "protective reactions" or "self-defense," etc. Although this idealized mythos grows more and more elaborate, and may even seem at times to be anti-bourgeois, the reality is that,

in all its interactions, bourgeois humanity's relationship to its environment and to the rest of mankind is defined exclusively in terms of self-interest and utilitarianism. It is this gap between the bourgeoisie's idealized image of itself and the actual reality of human existence that *Pillars of Society* seeks to explore.

It's worth noting at this point that the existence of bourgeois, capitalist society depends at least as much on the exploited as it does on the exploiters. None of the "exploiters" in *Pillars of Society*, for example, makes it a conscious goal to commit evil. In fact, everyone here feels that he or she is doing the proper thing. Some of them do commit crimes out of necessity—Aune does not want to be an accessory to mass murder, but he does want to protect his family. Others are blind or consistently able to see the world as the world is not—an ability, according to Rørlund, that is partly an inborn gift and partly an acquired trait. But the most dangerous are those who alter the definition of right and wrong to accommodate their own needs or desires, like Bernick.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the play is that when morality does triumph, it does so only accidentally. Some hope initially seems to lie in individual acts of moral courage: for example, Aune's boarding the *Indian Girl* after it has set out, which prevents what would be the ultimate calamity of the play—the death of a number of people, including Olaf. Ironically, Aune's action also saves Bernick and alters what had appeared to be the inevitable tragic design of *Pillars of Society*. But what Aune does is not truly moral or heroic, for it was really Betty Bernick's pleas that got him to disobey her husband's orders. What would he have done if left solely to his own devices?

These and other characters make up a cast of remarkably drawn individuals woven into a complex web of interaction and motivation. Hilmar Tønnesen (Mrs. Bernick's cousin), for his part, is a harmless, domesticated Viking who calls for daring and adventure but who has completely assimilated bourgeois values and prejudices. Johan Tønnesen operates as a sort of psychic double for Bernick: in simplistic terms, something like the good part of him; Lona, spurned by Bernick, has spent the last fifteen years educating his alter ego. But Bernick, when he gets desperate, decides that he must kill off this alter ego—Johan—in order to save himself. Rørlund is perhaps even more complex than these figures. He spouts the most moral platitudes in the play, and he actually believes himself. Indeed, he could be termed the Bard of the Bourgeoisie—the most valuable tool of the "pillars of society" because he doesn't have to be bribed, blackmailed, or bullied into helping them with his words. Yet Rørlund is at the same time a watered-down Brand who lashes out at the modern world as weak and unclean. He sees industrialization and technology, for example, as another form of idolatry and is against the

railroad, which will cut through the virgin countryside and better link his community with the outside world.

Some of the women in this society offer the major hope for change, partly due to their superior instincts and partly due to their centuries of exploitation. Only the women in the play are self-sacrificing, and a few are courageous in their attempts to break the shackles of social and sexual bondage. I am referring not just to Martha Bernick (Karsten Bernick's sister) and Dina Dorf, the only persons in the community who really question what is happening around them, but also to Lona Hessel, the sole character in the play to have reached a new and higher level of consciousness. Mrs. Rummel, Mrs. Holt, and Mrs. Lynge, the chorus of gossipmongers whose prototypes may be found in *Love's Comedy*, themselves have been brainwashed to worship their otherwise meaningless roles as appendages to the men who run the bourgeois world. Ironically, these women imitate their male counterparts and build their own caste system: just as the men send the women out of the room when they talk business, for example, the women send Dina and their daughters (Hilda Rummel and Netta Holt) out of the room when they talk gossip.

Dina Dorf, a lass of spunk and courage, is clearly tied to Højrdis of *The Vikings at Helgeland* (1857) and Svanbild of *Love's Comedy*. In two years she will be the Nora who slams the door on the doll house. Martha Bernick is akin to the Thea of *Hedda Gabler* (1890)—both of them strong women who may not initially appear to be so. Martha's sister-in-law, Betty Bernick, herself might have been an independent person of substance, but instead she has lived the dutiful, self-abnegatory myth of the bourgeois wife. Lona, for her part, is a woman from the New World, a location whose name speaks for itself. Like Apollo or Athena, Lona is the "bringer of light"; her entrance is prepared for by the closing of all the windows and the pulling shut of the curtains. She enters, then parts the curtains to let the light in and opens the windows to air out the room. Ironically, Lona was first mentioned in the play by Mrs. Rummel as the "dark spot" ("sun spot" in Norwegian; *Oxford Ibsen*, V, 34) on Bernick's happiness.

The plot of the *Pillars of Society*, rather than being "creaky," is one of the clearest indications of Ibsen's mastery of his medium. There is a late point of attack, with the action of the play gaining momentum at the same time as (figuratively speaking) it moves backward in time, growing more and more complex, and expanding its radius of implications. What is actually a long series of subplots is unified into a single, ever-widening, and whole action, with each complication a cog in the wheel that drives the catastrophe forward even as it simultaneously refers back to, or threatens to reveal, some previous lie, deception, or crime. For example, Aune's moral crisis over the

fate of the *Indian Girl* and its crew triggers a further moral crisis in Bernick, pushing him to make the decision that human life must be sacrificed for the greater good of society. Krap's own attempt to be conscientious (or is he just trying to get Aune fired?) reveals Bernick's automatic, almost unconscious ability to manipulate individuals and events.

Bernick sinks lower and lower in the audience's estimation as the plot forces him into corner after corner and he responds with greater and greater moral audacity, if not arrogance. Step by step he is pushed beyond the boundaries of any locus of moral values. By the end of Act III, Bernick has become a trapped, raging animal who takes for granted that his actions are beyond good and evil because he is working for the good of society—providing jobs, bringing prosperity to the community, and aiding progress in general. If this type of reasoning sounds familiar, that is because the same arguments are used every day to justify the creation of neutron bombs and the rape of the natural environment. Far from being outdated or simplistic, the strategic maneuverings of the characters and the conspiratorial nature of their business affairs in *Pillars of Society* are precisely in line with the contemporary reality of politics, technology, and commerce.

Structurally, the public nature of Acts I and IV of the play are balanced against the private nature of Acts II and III, which are composed almost entirely of scenes between two or three individuals. (Imagistically, this public-private opposition is complemented by the opposition or struggle between light and darkness.) This balance aside, the great structural problem in *Pillars of Society* has always been the ending, where the play seems to shift gears. To paraphrase one nineteenth-century critic, Ibsen planned a tragedy and bouleverised it into a farce (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 434). A momentous inevitability, a tragic force that has been building up for two-and-a-half hours, is suddenly reversed in the last ten minutes. How, then, are we to take the ending of the play and Bernick's apparent epiphany? Is Ibsen trying to drive home some naïve, idealistic point about man's ability to change and ultimately to change the world? Can years of deception and crime be atoned for so easily and bloodlessly? In his great confessional scene, Bernick claims to be coming clean, but can he or should he be taken totally at his word? He is remarkably vague about the past and Johan's role, or non-role, in it, he does not even mention Lona, and he conveniently skips over the affair of the *Indian Girl* and his thwarted attempt at mass murder. This last scene demands closer examination, since it is the single most important critical—and directorial—problem in the drama.

The action of *Pillars of Society* has been propelled relentlessly forward to what is clearly intended to be a *scène à faire*. Lona stands clutching the letters that can expose and destroy Bernick. Johan and Dina, not to mention

Olaf, seem to be on their way to certain death. Up the street come parade banners and a torchlight procession. Although this final movement thus seems like something out of the well-made play, Ibsen undercuts every one of the potentially melodramatic or sentimental elements in it. Lona tears up the letters; Olaf, Johan, and Dina are saved, as is the *Indian Girl*; the parade and festivities lose all direction. As Bernick prepares to address the crowd, he stands behind a large curtain like an actor about to enter the stage and play a grand scene. Rørhund even lays the icons of civilization at the feet of this “pillar of society”: the silver goblet and coffee service (crafts), an album of photographs (technology), and a “volume of sermons, printed on vellum and luxuriously bound” (art and religion; *Oxford Ibsen*, V, 120). The encomium by Rørhund is the longest speech in the play and is followed by Bernick’s own lengthy and platitudinous confession, which wins over the townspeople. Then there is the final tableau of Bernick surrounded by his family, in addition to the sententious exchanges with Lona that remind us of the optimistic, concluding couplets of much eighteenth-century drama.

If this last scene is not ironic, and even comic (recall that in 1870 when Ibsen began work on *Pillars of Society*, he called it a “comedy” [*Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, 75]), then there is no such thing as irony. Bernick may well believe every word he says, but the fact is, he has just pulled off another grand political coup, the greatest of his career, and he has turned to advantage even his own guilt. Far from being naïvely idealistic, the play’s ending poses a paradox, further underscores the inherent contradictions on which this society is based, and stresses the helplessness of humanity in the hands of a “pillar of society” like Bernick. As Rolf Fjelde points out in his introduction to the play, “Bernick is that most dangerous type of public man, the born opportunist who, with the agility of a dropped cat, can turn even contrition to his own advantage. Undoubtedly, he must continue to be closely watched” (*Complete Major Prose Plays*, 12).

#### IV. *Pillars of Society* and the Prose Cycle

I cannot think of another playwright whose work is as self-referential as Ibsen’s. It is as if, for his entire career, he were rewriting a single *Ur*-play. Ibsen himself said that “only by grasping and comprehending my entire production as a continuous and coherent whole will the reader be able to receive the precise impression I sought to convey in the individual parts of it” (*Letters and Speeches*, 330). He also said that in order to be understood, his plays had to be read “in the order in which I wrote them” (*Letters and Speeches*, 330). It is therefore important to look at *Pillars of Society* in relation to the plays that follow it, especially the next three, *A Doll House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Together they form a tetralogy



linked structurally as well as thematically. Furthermore, the conflict in each play leads to a dialectical synthesis that serves as the “given” (or thesis) for the next play. The opening work, *Pillars of Society*, begins on the most primitive level of social and ethical consciousness, as I have discussed. Then each play in the tetralogy takes this consciousness one step farther, as personified in the protagonists: after Bernick, Nora, Mrs. Alving, and Dr. Stockmann; in this scheme, Bernick’s crude, naïve fascism develops into Stockmann’s scientific, impassioned vision of a moral Platonic dictatorship. The public-private structure of the four acts of *Pillars of Society* itself is a paradigm of the structure of the first four plays in the cycle taken together; i.e., the large-cast, externally driven plays, *Pillars of Society* and *An Enemy of the People*, are balanced by the two small-cast, inner-directed plays, *A Doll House* and *Ghosts*.

As early as 1882 Ibsen was already referring to his prose plays as “a series” (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 1). After the completion of *Ghosts*, in correspondence with an American publisher, he insisted that the three plays (*Pillars of Society*, *A Doll House*, and *Ghosts*) be published in the order in which they were written: “This one [*Ghosts*] goes the furthest, and ought therefore to be the last of the series. This should, I suggest, open with *Pillars of Society*, after which should come *A Doll House*, since this forms as it were an introduction to, or preparation for, *Ghosts*” (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 1). Each of these three plays has a single set, and all are set indoors (as is *An Enemy of the People*). Each of the dramas centers on the family as the paradigmatic unit of society; *Ghosts* is even subtitled “a family drama” (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 345). Karsten Bernick himself declares that “the family is the core of society” (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 41)—so much so in *Pillars of Society* that at least half of the large cast is related by birth or marriage. And *Pillars of Society*, like *An Enemy of the People* at the close of the tetralogy, ends with a final tableau of the family huddled together. In the course of the first three plays in this tetralogy, the scope of the action is wound tighter and tighter, as the casts shrink from nineteen to seven to five. The length of the action is itself reduced, as *Pillars of Society* takes place over five days, *A Doll House* three days, and *Ghosts* a single night. (This last play, incidentally, observes all three classical unities.)

In each of the first four cycle plays, an alien, a visitor returning or coming from afar—Lona Hessel, Mrs. Linde, Oswald Alving, Thomas Stockmann—brings with him or her a new, enlightened code of ethics or system of values and thereby sets in motion the dialectical conflict of the drama. Each of these characters arrives armed with a new outlook on life that challenges or calls into question the existing social and moral order. In *Pillars of Society*, Lona brings the ideals of truth and freedom and comes from a mythical American West—the New World or the Land beyond the Horizon, where people are



genuinely liberated. These ideals of truth and freedom then return with a vengeance in the next three plays, as they also do later in *The Wild Duck* (1884).

Each of the four plays in the tetralogy also revolves around a central dramatic or poetic metaphor. In *An Enemy of the People* it is the metaphor of the Baths. The Baths are the lifeblood of the community, but they are poisoned: instead of cleansing and healing as they should, they cause harm. Stockmann, as a scientist, proposes his new plan for the ideal Baths, a plan suggestive of the ideal Hellenic society he envisions. In *Ghosts*, the central metaphor is worship of the dead, sociologically a ritual that has developed in every culture and civilization on earth—except that here that worship is extended to include dead ideas and dead values. This metaphor is coupled with the most savage and uncompromising one in Ibsen's dramatic *oeuvre*: congenital syphilis, or one generation's tainted legacy to the next. In *A Doll House*, of course, the title refers to a house built for dolls in which people are trying, and ultimately failing, to live.

Aside from its own central metaphor, which I shall discuss below, *Pillars of Society* contains a number of motifs and parallels found in Ibsen's other plays. Most obvious is the situation of the two women (Lona Hessel and Betty Bernick) in love with the same man, which we see in *Hedda Gabler*. The most significant parallels to *Pillars of Society*, however, are to be found in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896)—the last play before the epilogue of the cycle in 1899, *When We Dead Awaken* (subtitled “a dramatic epilogue” [*Oxford Ibsen*, VIII, 235]). The protagonist of each drama, a captain of industry, has married for money, not love. *John Gabriel Borkman*, written almost twenty years after *Pillars of Society*, is a reexamination of a Bernick who has fallen from power. Betty, excluded from this Bernick's life and work, has here grown into the bitter, vengeful Gunhild. Olaf has grown up into Erhart in *John Gabriel Borkman*: each has been groomed to carry on the life's work of his father, but both wind up running away from home. Bernick's prosaic enthusiasm about the railroad plan should be compared to Borkman's own aria as he surveys his kingdom for the last time:

BERNICK. . . . Just think of the huge tracts of forest it will open up! Think of all those rich mineral deposits that can be worked! Think of the river, with one waterfall after another! What about the industrial development that could be made there! (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 41)

BORKMAN. I feel the veins of metal, reaching their curving, branching, beckoning arms out to me. . . . (*His hands outstretched.*) But I'll whisper to you here in the silence of the night. I love you,

lying there unconscious in the depths and the darkness! I love you, you riches straining to be born . . . I love you, love you, love you! (*Complete Major Prose Plays*, 1021)

The central metaphor of *Pillars of Society* is the *Indian Girl*, a ship whose hull and substructure have rotted away entirely but which is made to look seaworthy by superficial patching or “bandaging.” It is not surprising, of course, that a Norwegian writer should use a ship as a symbol; Ibsen did it often in his poetry. The image of the ship, which Shaw himself used in *Heartbreak House* (1919), stands for the “ship of state” or the state of society. The talk about the *Indian Girl* in *Pillars of Society* may seem literal, but in the context of the play, it is designed to extend beyond the realm of realism:

AUNE. That boat’s hull is absolutely rotten, Mr. Bernick. The more we patch it, the worse it gets. (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 52)

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KRAP. I’m very sorry . . . but that’s the honest truth. Something funny’s going on, I tell you. Been no new timber put in at all, as far as I could judge. Just been plugged and caulked and patched with bits of plating and tarpaulin and that sort of thing. All faked up! The *Indian Girl* will never make New York. She’ll go to the bottom like a sprung bucket. (*Oxford Ibsen*, V, 80)

Ibsen is implying that if we want to change society, we must bring new “timber” and rebuild from the inside out, not just continue to repair the faulty exterior. I am reminded here of the letter (to Georg Brandes) where he expressed a similar lack of faith in political movements: “Everyone wants their own special revolutions, always in external things. What is really needed is a revolution of the human spirit” (*Letters and Speeches*, 106-107). *Pillars of society*, indeed.

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# “Shaw, *The Philanderer*, and the (Un)Making of Shavian Drama”

## I. Dramatic Beginnings

“For the right moment you must wait, as Quintus Fabius Maximus did most patiently when warring against Hannibal . . .; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless.”

—motto of the Fabian Society and epigraph of the first Fabian tract, January 1884.

Shaw was thirty-seven years old in 1893 when he started work on *The Philanderer*, his second play after *Widowers' Houses* (1892). In 1893 Shaw was known in London intellectual circles as a respected music critic, an accomplished orator, and a Socialist propagandist. He had written five novels, two of them published, both unsuccessfully. In 1889 he had edited and contributed two essays to the enormously influential *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, which went through three editions within a year. On July 18, 1890, Shaw delivered his famous lecture on Ibsen to an enthusiastic audience at St. James Restaurant; this lecture was then expanded and published in 1891 as *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*—the first full-length study of Ibsen in the English language.

Shaw's writing of *The Philanderer* in 1893 began, as he himself put it, “with a slice of life; most of the first act really occurred” (Henderson, *Fortnightly Review*, 439). Here is how it did so: at the age of twenty-nine, Shaw had lost his virginity to an insistent, passionate, strong-willed widow named Mrs. Jenny Patterson, who was twelve years his senior. Mrs. Patterson, one of his mother's singing students, invited the shy young man over to her London apartment one afternoon for tea. Shaw accepted the invitation, and before the afternoon was over the aggressive woman had almost literally raped him. Shaw did not resist her advances. “I permitted her,” he told Ellen Terry in a letter of October 12, 1896, “being intensely curious on the subject” (St. John, 90).

When Frank Harris asked him forty years later what his affair with Jenny Patterson was like, Shaw responded in a letter dated June 20, 1930: “If you want to know what it was like, read *The Philanderer*, and cast her for the part of Julia, and me for that of Charteris” (quoted in Harris, 30). He also wrote to Hesketh Pearson that “Mrs. Patterson was my model for Julia; and the first act of *The Philanderer* is founded on a very horrible scene between her and Florence Farr” (quoted in Pearson, 123). Besides supplying Shaw with

the opportunity to break off with Jenny, this incident supplied him with the opening situation for his new play. On June 27, 1893, *The Philanderer* was completed, four and a half months after Shaw had started work on it. But the four acts of the final version of the play (published in 1898) were originally conceived as three acts; and in 1930 Shaw made minor changes to the play for his *Collected Works* and recompressed Acts II and III into a single act, thereby turning *The Philanderer* back into the three-act work it was intended to be. His seriousness about the play is evidenced by the fact that the revisions and alterations to its various drafts are more extensive than those for any of his fifty-two plays, with the possible exception of *Heartbreak House* (1919).

Dealing with the serious literary and academic criticism of *The Philanderer* is a swift and easy task, because very little exists. Pick up any number of the full-length critical books on Shaw, and you will find that either they do not even mention the play or it is written off in a few sentences or even phrases. Here are a few of them: “a self-congratulatory piece of autobiography” and “a retrogressive step in Shaw’s career as a dramatist” (Colin Wilson, 115); “an apology for his own comprehensive philanderings” (Maurice Valency, 89); Shaw’s “worst play” (St. John Ervine, 108). Even in the massive field of Shaw scholarship, then, there is no large body of criticism to plough through; *The Philanderer* is only grudgingly accepted into the Shavian canon. This judgment began to be altered in the late 1970s, it’s true, when there was a resurgence of interest in the play and it was performed at the Roundabout in New York, Britain’s National Theatre, and at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Later, serious studies of *The Philanderer* started to appear in such books as J. Ellen Gainor’s *Shaw’s Daughters* (1991) and Peter Gahan’s *Shaw Shadows* (2004). Nevertheless, the play is still seen as inferior to Shaw’s major works, as a mere preparatory sketch for the larger canvases of his subsequent dramatic masterpieces.

Now a deadly critical distortion occurs when critics take an author’s greatest works and set such “masterpieces” up as literary peaks, in relation to which all his other work is viewed as either an ascent toward these heights or a descent from them. Thus, *The Philanderer* is usually approached simply as an amateurish, rough, flawed version of *Man and Superman* (1903), *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906), or *Getting Married* (1908), depending on the individual critic’s bent. Putting a playwright’s work into the perspective of his career as a whole can indeed be valuable and illuminating, but it is not useful or valid to say that *Ajax* (450-430 B.C.) is not a good play because it is not *Oedipus* (430 B.C.), that *Little Eyolf* (1894) is a bad play because it is not *Hedda Gabler* (1890), or that *Andromache* (1667) is somehow flawed because it is not *Phaedra* (1677).

We all bring expectations and preferences to the theater, critics no less



than audiences; this is especially true for a playwright with whose work we are familiar. In fact, to facilitate the clarification and definition of our expectations, we invent adjectival forms of the playwright's name—Brechtian, Shavian, Shakespearean, Aristophanic, Racinian, Pinteresque, Beckettian. Without realizing it, we start approaching a playwright's work, not on its own terms, but solely in terms of how much or how little it fits the ideal Shavian, Sophoclean, or Chekhovian model. In Shaw criticism, the holy trinity consists of *Major Barbara* (1905), *Heartbreak House*, and *Saint Joan* (1923), so the critics evaluate and discuss his entire dramatic *oeuvre* on the basis of how similar or dissimilar any given play is to these works. And since *The Philanderer* is quite dissimilar to each of the three plays named, it is considered an inferior drama.

To be sure, critical perceptions of *The Philanderer* have been severely altered by what seemed to be Shaw's own disowning of the play in a letter to Ellen Terry in August of 1896:

To tell you the truth, I have had a shock down here. In the evenings they make me read plays to them; and the other night I had to fall back on my Opus 2, a comedy called *The Philanderer*, now some years old. It turned out to be a combination of mechanical farce with realistic filth which quite disgusted me; and I felt that if my plays get stale at this rate, I cannot afford to postpone their production longer than I can help. (St. John, 38)

This letter has been quoted dozens of times by disparagers of the play. However, we must bear in mind the context of the letter. Shaw was writing it to persuade Terry to undertake the role of Candida, so what was wrong, in this instance, with talking down one of his other plays that had a tempting part for an actress?

On April 19, 1898, *The Philanderer* was published in *Plays Unpleasant*. This volume also included *Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893); on the same day *Plays Pleasant* was also published, including *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1894), *The Man of Destiny* (1895), and *You Never Can Tell* (1897). Shaw became a literary sensation as a result. The most favorably received play in these two collections was *Candida*, and the most savagely attacked was *Mrs. Warren's Profession*—in relation to which *The Philanderer* fared only slightly better. *The Academy's* critic, for one, charged Shaw with ignoring the emotions of his audience in this work:

*The Philanderer* is professedly the study of a male flirt. . . . The defect of the play seems most clearly to exhibit Mr. Shaw's own main defect—the utter want of any real experience in life. . . . he has not



understood, has not sympathised . . . ; it does not move him at all on the side for which theatre mainly exists, that of the human emotion. (Murray, 614)

Shaw would hear this charge again and again—that he was heartless, cold-blooded, inhuman, unrealistic, merely delighting in paradox. But, in his “Author’s Apology” (1902) for *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, he pointed out that his plays seemed paradoxical and inhuman not in relation to real life, but only in relation to the sentimental, romantic, idealized theatrical notions of human behavior that “did not exist off the stage.” Shaw went on declare “that the real secret of the cynicism and inhumanity of which shallower critics accuse me is the unexpectedness with which my characters behave like human beings, instead of conforming to the romantic logic of the stage” (“Author’s Apology,” xxiii).

## II. *The Philanderer* as/at Play

“If you marry, you will regret it: if you do not marry, you will also regret it. Believe a woman, you will regret it, believe her not, you will also regret it. Hang yourself, you will regret it, do not hang yourself, and you will regret it: this is the sum and substance of all philosophy.”

—Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 1843 (54).

To the play itself: the world of *The Philanderer* is that of the middle and upper-middle class, and the opening presents a light scene of lovemaking between Grace and Charteris, two intelligent people. This first scene appears to be one of high comedy, very sophisticated and with an emphasis on verbal wit. As the scene gathers momentum, it is interrupted by Julia, and a scene of sharp contrast follows, one that seems almost farcical on account of its total reversal of the expected male-female roles of pursuer and pursued. As this scene approaches its climax, it too is interrupted: by the entrance of Craven and Cuthbertson, two long-lost friends. The Ibsenite Realist, Charteris, is now surrounded by Idealists: a Romantic Idealist, Julia, who believes in the ideal of “depth of feeling” as the guarantee that she is a special human being with a “soul”; a Military Idealist, Craven, who sees society as one large barracks and the observing of social conventions and proprieties as the equivalent of “following orders”; and a Theatrical Idealist, Cuthbertson, who believes that life should aspire to the ideals of a sentimental play. Charteris makes a partial revelation about the preceding action to Craven and Cuthbertson, followed by a full revelation to Cuthbertson, which is a good outline of Act I:

CHARTERIS. Julia wants to marry me: I want to marry Grace. I came here tonight to sweetheart Grace. Enter Julia. Alarums and excursions. Exit Grace. Enter you and Craven. Subterfuge and excuses. Exeunt Craven and Julia. And here we are. (38)

In Act II the action moves into a polyphonic series of duologues, and the love triangle expands to a quartet. The opening scene introduces Sylvia, Julia's younger sister (a female Realist), and Dr. Paramore (a male Idealist). It is possible that Sylvia is actually a "closet Idealist"; her ardent feminism may well be just another ideal, for she still defines herself as an "unwomanly woman" rather than as an individual human being. To her mind, to be treated as a "man" means that she is accepted as a human being. Paramore is a Scientific Idealist who, generally, perceives other human beings in the same way that he views microbes in his laboratory. Interestingly, although he is in many ways unsentimental and probably an atheist, he still believes in the sentimental ideal of romantic love.

Enter Cuthbertson, and we see that the two Idealists are at perfect ease with each other. We then discover that Paramore is in love with Julia but doesn't think he has a chance. With the entrance of Craven and the exit of Paramore, the two men—fathers both (Craven to Julia, Cuthbertson to Grace)—talk "man to man," and, by adopting the familiar attitude of male cynicism, briefly enter into the world of the Realist without realizing they are doing so. Although both of them believe absolutely in the romantic ideal of the institution of marriage, Craven confides to Cuthbertson, "Well, Jo, I may as well make a clean breast of it—everybody knew it. I married for money." Cuthbertson responds encouragingly, "And why not, Dan? Why not? We can't get on without it, you know" (41).

This moment is complicated by the fact that Cuthbertson married the woman with whom Craven was in love, but it is still the only moment in the play where these two characters let the masks fall away; it is also the only scene in which they are together on stage alone. With all social pretense gone, they speak to each other as two men in a bar would. Enter Charteris, who explains his dilemma frankly to Craven and Cuthbertson, hoping for some advice from two "men of the world." But suddenly, they are fathers again, and each is shocked that Charteris wants to talk "man to man" about the communications he has received from both Grace and Julia since he saw them in Act I. Cuthbertson and Craven can respond only with fatherly sentiment, as the latter does here:

CRAVEN. Charteris: no woman writes such a letter to a man unless he has made advances to her.

CHARTERIS (*mournfully*). How little you know the world, Colonel!  
The New Woman is not like that.

CRAVEN. I can only give you oldfashioned advice, my boy; and that  
is that it's well to be off with the Old Woman before you're on  
with the New. (43)

Julia arrives, and Cuthbertson and Craven go to lunch while Julia finds a pretense to lag behind. Once again the play approaches farcical dimensions as Charteris tries frantically to get out of the clutches of Julia, upsetting all our theatrical expectations of male-female role models. The scene culminates in a line spoken by almost every heroine of nineteenth-century melodrama, but now it is the man who protests: "Unhand me, Julia. If you don't let me go, I'll scream for help" (43). Here, again, a scene building to a climax is interrupted, and the final confrontation between Charteris and Julia is postponed by the reappearance of Cuthbertson, who reminds Julia that her "lunch will be cold" (44).

Sylvia and Charteris are subsequently left alone. They are at ease with each other, and for once Charteris can have a "man to man" talk with someone:

SYLVIA (*thoughtfully*). . . . I don't think you care a bit more for one woman than for another.

CHARTERIS. You mean I don't care a bit less for one woman than another.

SYLVIA. That makes it worse. But what I mean is that you never bother about their being only women; you talk to them just as you do to me or any other fellow. That's the secret of your success. You can't think how sick they get of being treated with the respect due to their sex. (44)

This characteristic of his is the key to Charteris's successful philandering, but it also makes him prey to a woman like Julia, who sees him as the ultimate challenge.

Julia is convinced that Charteris's advanced theories about male-female relationships and his objections to romantic love are due to the fact that he simply hasn't yet found the right woman—a woman, like her, of sincerity and depth of feeling. But, no matter who the woman may be, Charteris appears to be uncompromising in his refusal to act upon romantic, sentimental, and idealized assumptions as if they were real. The point is not that he is heartless, cruel, unfeeling—Charteris *does* have emotions, and he does love Grace—but that he refuses to make his intellect subservient to his emotions, i.e., he refuses to become a character in a popular sentimental drama.

Grace soon arrives and Sylvia leaves. The scene that follows is a very sophisticated intellectual chess game during which Grace counters Charteris

move for move. Although neither one is posing, Charteris does at times slip into the clichéd speech of the romantic lover—partly as a game but also partly to test Grace, to see if she really is the New Woman. Ironically, the more Grace refuses to marry Charteris, the more he is attracted to her, to the “newness” in her womanliness:

GRACE. Oh, Leonard, does your happiness really depend on me?

CHARTERIS (*tenderly*). Absolutely. (*She beams with delight. A sudden revulsion comes to him at the sight: he recoils, dropping her hands and crying.*) Ah no: why should I lie to you? My happiness depends on nobody but myself. I can do without you.

GRACE (*nerving herself*). So you shall. Thank you for the truth. Now I will tell you the truth. . . . I love you. . . . but I’m an advanced woman. I’m what my father calls the New Woman. I quite agree with all your ideas.

CHARTERIS (*scandalised*). That’s a nice thing for a respectable woman to say! You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

GRACE. I am quite in earnest about them too, though you are not. That is why I will never marry a man I love too much. It would give him a terrible advantage over me: I should be utterly in his power. That’s what the New Woman is like. . . . And so we must part. (45-46)

The second act of *The Philanderer* thus ends with the posing of the paradox that a true marriage is possible only between people who do not love each other.

Act III begins on a note of gloom with a discussion of Craven’s supposed terminal illness—“Paramore’s Disease” (44, 47)—and the change in eating and drinking habits he has been forced to accept. Then comes the revelation that Paramore’s Disease has been disproved and that Craven is a perfectly healthy man. (Paramore’s Disease, incidentally, is supposed to be a disease of the liver—traditionally the seat of the passions.) Craven’s continued insistence on vegetarianism and abstinence, not because he now has to live in such a way but on moral principle, gives us a key to the Idealist mentality:

CUTHBERTSON (*chuckling*). Aha! you made a virtue of it, did you, Dan?

CRAVEN (*warmly*). I made a virtue of necessity, Jo. No one can blame me. (47)

No one will blame him, indeed, because society operates on this principle of convincing people that what they have to do is what they ought to do.

Paramore and Charteris are now by themselves for the first time, and Charteris tries to get Paramore to propose to Julia. This little moment contains another insight into the Idealist, who looks at everything in abstract terms. Paramore is angry that Craven's life is no longer in danger, because it has struck a blow to the progress of medical science:

CHARTERIS. . . . Didn't you congratulate him?

PARAMORE (*scandalised*). Congratulate him! Congratulate a man on the worst blow pathological science has received for the last three hundred years!

CHARTERIS. No, no, no. Congratulate him on having his life saved.  
(50)

Grace enters and takes Paramore aside to chat, followed by the entrance of Julia, who, jealous to see Grace speaking with Paramore, throws a fit. The men leave and the stage is now set for the great confrontation scene in the play, an agon between the Realist Woman and the Idealist Woman:

GRACE. . . . How I hate to be a woman when I see, by you, what wretched childish creatures we are! Those two men would cut you dead and have you turned out of the Club if you were a man, and had behaved in such a way before them. But because you are only a woman, they are forbearing! sympathetic! gallant! Oh, if you had a scrap of self-respect, their indulgence would make you creep all over. I understand now why Charteris has no respect for women.

JULIA. How dare you say that?

GRACE. Dare! I love him. And I have refused his offer to marry me.

JULIA (*incredulous but hopeful*). You have refused!

GRACE. Yes; because I will not give myself to any man who has learnt how to treat women from you and your like. I can do without his love, but not without his respect; and it is your fault that I cannot have both. Take his love then; . . . Run to him, and beg him to take you back. (52)

Julia concludes with "Thank Heaven, I have a heart: that is why you can hurt me as I cannot hurt you" (52), after which Grace turns away from her contemptuously.

The masks have been ripped away during the above exchange, and we are completely immersed in the world of sexual power politics. Julia shows that she is far from the naïve romantic she has seemed to be. She is not a Nora, for she is fully conscious of her ability to use her sexuality to manipulate men

in order to get what she wants. Grace, for her part, loses her temper without realizing it, in her own way thereby sinking just as low as she thinks Julia has sunk. Perhaps she too, like Craven, has made a virtue of necessity since she doesn't have Julia's innate sex appeal. They are both stripped naked, in any event: two women fighting over a man just as shamelessly as a pair of animals fighting over a piece of meat. In its dissection of character and laying bare of human emotion, this scene is far from being merely cleverly comic.

When Craven enters, the masks are flung back on. Julia rushes to him, crying "Daddy!" (52). Since Charteris, now rejected by Grace, is not as attractive to Julia as he had been, she soon rushes off to Paramore's house, where all will gather for the last act, while Charteris tries to delay their arrival in the hope that Paramore will have enough time to propose to Julia. Though we get further insight into the characters in Act IV, especially Julia and Charteris, the key to sustaining the action here is suspense: the suspense of waiting for the answer to the question "How is the play going to end?" or "Who will marry whom?" And this is by no means certain at the end of Act III. Grace seems to be out of the picture as a mate for Charteris, which somewhat increases Julia's chances, but Paramore is suddenly much more attractive to Julia now that Grace has shown an interest in him. Moreover, it is not at all certain that Grace will not change her mind about Charteris's proposal, and she insists at the end of Act III that she, too, is going to Paramore's house to see what will happen in the end.

In the course of Act IV, Julia has a dramatic anagnorisis, as we see from the following exchange:

PARAMORE. As it is, I can only admire you, and feel how pleasant it is to have you here.

JULIA (*bitterly*). And pet me, and say pretty things to me! I wonder you don't offer me a saucer of milk at once. . . . you seem to regard me very much as if I were a Persian cat. . . . You are all alike, every one of you. Even my father only makes a pet of me. (55)

This is not an act on Julia's part, even though she is toying with the idea of marrying Paramore; she is having an extended recognition. As Act IV progresses, she realizes that what Charteris says of her is true, that she is a slave to her feelings or passions, and this is not a noble or wonderful thing to be. Julia has a recognition comparable to Nora's, but she undergoes the further recognition that she can do nothing about it.

Paramore himself talks his way through every cliché of romantic love—in each of which, unlike Charteris, he fervently believes. But his words only further Julia's recognition of how foolish she is when she gives herself over to

her own emotions: “(*earnestly*). Believe me: it is not merely your beauty that attracts me: I know other beautiful women. It is your heart, your sincerity, your sterling reality, your great gifts of character . . .” (55). With the arrival of Craven, Paramore hustles his future father-in-law offstage to formally ask for his daughter’s hand, while Charteris and Julia are left alone for their last confrontation. And here, all the themes of the play converge:

JULIA (*earnestly*). It is you who are the vivisector—a far crueller, more wanton vivisector than he.

CHARTERIS. Yes; but then I learn so much more from my experiments than he does! And the victims learn as much as I do. That’s where my moral superiority comes in. (57)

Charteris is right, and he is helping here to solidify Julia’s anagnorisis.

Ultimately, our understanding of Charteris is an ironic one. We wonder if his uncompromising refusal to sink to Julia’s level has in fact made him sink just as low, if his advanced ideas have become just another set of Ideals. As a result, the ending of *The Philanderer* is very serious, indeed:

JULIA (*exhausted, allowing herself to take it*). You are right. I am a worthless woman.

CHARTERIS (*triumphant, and gaily remonstrating*). Oh, why?

JULIA. Because I am not brave enough to kill you.

GRACE (*taking her in her arms as she sinks, almost fainting, away from him*). Oh, no. Never make a hero of a philanderer. (*Charteris, amused and untouched, shakes his head laughingly. The rest look at Julia with concern, and even a little awe, feeling for the first time the presence of a keen sorrow.*) (61)

This conclusion is close to tragic. It is the equivalent, from a reverse angle, of Nora’s returning to Torvald, not out of a concession to audience taste and Idealism, but because she realizes that her romantic sentimentality is not an illusion or something that she can disown but what she is at the very core of her being, and that, although it would be theoretically wonderful to be liberated and independent, she cannot live without an equally sentimental Torvald—just as Julia requires a Paramore for her own emotional survival. For his part, the advanced Ibsenite philosopher, Leonard Charteris—Shaw’s Gregers Werle, a distant cousin of Brand and Rubek—has actually not progressed one step from Jack Horner or any other Restoration rake. As for the New Woman, Grace Tranfield is hardly a flattering portrait, especially when, toward the end of the play, she approaches self-loathing. A glimmer of hope seems to be presented in the uncorrupted Sylvia, but that may be only because she has not yet been tainted by the cynicism of worldly experience.



### III. The Ideal and the Real, or Comedy and Tragedy

“Technically, I do not find myself able to proceed otherwise than as former playwrights have done. . . . My stories are the old stories; my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloone . . .; my jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them.”

—Shaw, Preface, *Three Plays for Puritans*, 1901 (xxxv).

It has long been assumed that the basis of Shaw's method, in *The Philanderer* as in other plays of his, was the shattering or at least the disregard of popular theatrical conventions of his time. Actually, the opposite is true: Shaw's major plays are the very apotheosis of nineteenth-century dramatic technique and the popular performance tradition. Just as surely as the effectiveness onstage of *Black-Ey'd Susan* (1829), *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1863) depended upon a set assumptions and conventions implicitly accepted by the audience, just so do *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Candida*, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), and *Major Barbara* depend almost entirely for their theatrical effectiveness on this exact same set of conventions and assumptions. By injecting into his plays challenging intellectual content, by clouding and thus complicating the moral perspective (i.e., by making the immoral, or even the moral, amoral), and by feeding on the irony between real life and the theater's idealized version of it, Shaw was able to employ the mechanics of the well-made play and the time-tested structural pattern of melodrama with freedom and dexterity.

A simple summary of the action in *Arms and the Man*, *You Never Can Tell*, or *Man and Superman* (minus the third act) would show Shaw's skill in plot construction. He did not reject the traditions of the *pièce à thèse*, the *pièce bien-faite*, or popular melodrama, but instead employed them in their most extreme and radical forms. He was thus dead serious when he declared, “A really good Adelphi [Theatre] melodrama is of first-rate literary importance, because it only needs elaboration to become a masterpiece” (*Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, 72). It's true that Shaw often seems to be parodying the popular theater or contravening melodrama, but in fact he is shamelessly exploiting every theatrical trick and melodramatic convention known.

The basic situation of *The Philanderer*, for example, was familiar to any nineteenth-century theater audience: A. (Julia) loves and wants to marry B. (Charteris), who loves and wants to marry C. (Grace), while D. (Paramore) loves and wants to marry A. This initial dramatic premise is the springboard for the action of the play, and that action achieves its fruition in the conflicts between the various characters. But the outcome of the play is determined by the beliefs and ideas of those characters, not by the providential design

of melodrama. For in melodrama characters are slaves to their moral classification; in Shaw, as Brecht pointed out, "The opinions of his characters constitute their fate" (11). If *The Philanderer* were true to classic comic form, its "fate" would be to end with a pair of marriages (Julia-Charteris and Grace-Paramore). But there is no such reconciliation or synthesis in the play, as there is, say, in *Major Barbara*. True, there is a marriage agreed upon at the end, but it is only one that ironically fulfills the dialectical thrust of the drama.

Shaw's plays are all structured dialectically. A thesis is stated; counter to this thesis is presented another one, an obstacle to and contradiction of the original thesis. *The Philanderer* posits two antithetical approaches to the modern institution of marriage: marriage with love and marriage without love. Each thesis produces unpleasant or even diastrophic consequences, and both are found insufficient. *The Philanderer* therefore does not produce a reconciliation in the end, and this play, like *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Pygmalion* (1913), *Heartbreak House*, and *Saint Joan*, is not structurally a comedy. It does not bring order out of chaos or reconcile two opposites; the synthesis must be provided by the audience. The original (and rejected) final act of the play did provide the only possible synthesis—love without marriage.

Charteris and Julia, of course, are the two characters who represent the dialectical extremes, in this case of human personality: Charteris feels only intellectually and Julia thinks only feelingly. The dynamic that these two figures represent could be expressed in a number of different ways: the tension between Apollo and Dionysus, Logos in conflict with Eros, the Ethical Man versus the Aesthetic Man, the struggle between the Ego and the Id. Any one of these approaches could be fruitful if applied to *The Philanderer*—when all is said and done, one dialectic is as good as another. But a good way in which to approach the play is to use the vocabulary that Shaw himself employed (and employed, as well, in part II of this essay) in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* to describe these two types of personality: Realism versus Idealism.

An Idealist is one who cannot look life in the face, and instead puts a mask (an Ideal) over every potentially unpleasant reality. Thus marriage, in reality a simple property relationship originally devised as a means of effectively propagating the species, to the Idealist becomes a sacred or holy institution through which man and woman find their ultimate fulfillment as human beings. Similarly, because it was unpleasant or even terrifying to face the inevitable reality of death, the Idealists invented the notion of an afterlife, and so on and so forth. The rare person, Shaw's one in a thousand, is the Realist, the man or woman who dares to rip the mask away, look reality squarely in the face, and call things by their proper names. A Realist

is by nature an Ironist. The ultimate, true Realist is incapable of not seeing anything unironically—indeed, this is the tragedy of the Ironist. The true Realist must be able to preserve an ironic understanding of even his own sense of irony. Indeed, he can turn even it into yet another Ideal, which truly makes him one man in a thousand. Idealists, by contrast, are incapable of an ironic understanding of life. An Idealist will therefore wage wars to end wars and build bombs to preserve the peace.

It is important not to view these categories as permanent classifications or static conditions. Shaw is presenting an evolutionary principle of human society wherein Realists and Idealists are not so much opposites as ideologies that are at different levels of development. Most important of all, we must realize that the Realist, after ripping away the mask from a given Ideal, will eventually substitute another Ideal for the one he has destroyed. Progress does obtain, however, because, as Shaw writes in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, “every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted” (45). Now this model of Realism versus Idealism fits certain plays by Ibsen very well and others not at all, but *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is much more valuable for understanding Shaw than it is in understanding Ibsen.

On a very basic level, the cast of characters in *The Philanderer* can be broken down as follows: Realists—Charteris, Grace, Sylvia; Idealists—Julia, Paramore, Cuthbertson, Craven. Cuthbertson and Craven are modeled on the portrait of the Idealist in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. Cuthbertson has had an absolutely wretched failure of a marriage and is now separated, but still he would defend marriage to the death as an institution. Craven, who was in love with the woman whom Cuthbertson married, gave her up, thereby sacrificing what he considered his happiness for the romantic ideal of doing what was best for her; eventually he married, not for love, but for money. Grace, a widow, was an Idealist when she married, but the experience of marriage made her a Realist; like Charteris, she has torn the mask off the institution and now sees marriage not as the ultimate fulfillment of the human personality, through love, but as a conventional social arrangement and property relationship—not at all the correct arrangement or relationship for one person who loves another, because it will degrade them both as human beings. Julia herself believes fervently in the romantic ideal of marriage and the sentimental ideal of deep, intense feeling as the ultimate proof of a sincere, noble, and higher form of being.

The proper mode for the Idealist is comedy, for the Realist tragedy. And the Realist-Idealist extremes of character that are yoked to the central action of this play may partially explain the seeming incongruity of its structure. To wit: *The Philanderer* seems like a different play when Charteris and Grace (two Realists) are onstage together, as opposed to when Charteris and Julia

(Realist and Idealist) are together onstage. The conflict in *The Philanderer*, in fact, is precisely the one between Idealist and Realist, and it takes the specific form of a struggle between passion and intellect. The action of the play is an attempt to reconcile this opposition. The plot forces the characters into a series of choices—Charteris decides to reject Julia, Grace decides to reject Charteris, Julia decides to reject Charteris, Julia decides to marry Paramore. Each choice centers around circumstances reflecting the opposition between passion and intellect and the characters' understanding of those circumstances. Since each decision made alters the previous set of circumstances and the characters' understanding of them, it further complicates the next decision that has to be made, and in this way each decision becomes more complex and more important. For example, Julia's final decision to marry Paramore is determined by a causal chain of prior decisive actions in the play—Charteris has rejected her once, Grace has rejected Charteris, Charteris has rejected Julia again, Paramore has shown an interest in her, Grace is showing an interest in Paramore, then Paramore declares his love and asks Julia to marry him.

The "given" of the play is that marriage is an outmoded institution. The hypothesis of *The Philanderer* is that educated, modern, enlightened people can nevertheless find fulfillment through the existing institution of marriage. As each possible match is suggested and debated and each decision made, various aspects of the hypothesis are explored and tested until the play ultimately proves the hypothesis false. Intelligent, advanced, civilized human beings cannot marry and at the same time remain intelligent, advanced, civilized human beings.

*The Philanderer's* ending is by far its most challenging moment, and it should not be pushed aside or allowed to "take care of itself" in any production. It demands clear choices by the actors and a distinct point of view on the part of the director. The audience must take this conclusion seriously and not just as mere Shavian perversity or paradox. To be part of a satisfying theatrical experience, it must present a clear challenge to audience members, and one that they will actually confront once they are outside the theater. The ending is neither happy nor funny, neither a paradox nor a "cop-out" on Shaw's part. It would have been much easier to unite the pairs of lovers at the end, as Shaw would later often do, and as traditional comic form demands. As it stands, the play's rhythm modulates between an idealized vision of life (comedy) and an ironic vision of life (tragedy). Then it ends on a tragic note.

In *The Philanderer*, then, Shaw would allow himself to explore the basis of his understanding of life and human relationships much more honestly than he would in his later plays, when his ideas about Creative Evolution

had ossified into an orthodoxy. It is itself a human, or dramatic, tragedy to see Shaw, the great iconoclast, the great Realist, thus transform himself into as much of an Idealist as any such character in his plays. Nietzsche is reputed to have said, “Save me from my disciples!” and Shaw could well have taken this as a bit of advice, because he became his own worst disciple. At a certain point, in fact, Shaw’s ideas become empty and mean nothing, because he invests nothing of himself in his work. His devastating wit and incredible intellect become an insulation. And they ultimately turn against him when we begin to realize that Shaw is clever enough to build convincing arguments for absolutely anything. Shaw’s saint and soldier, Greek professor, and munitions maker can all convince us with equal dexterity that their vision of the world is right. As Don Juan himself admits in a Shaw play, “Yes, it is mere talk . . . nothing but words which I or anyone else can turn inside out like a glove” (III.ii [*Don Juan in Hell*], *Man and Superman*, 386).

Part of Shaw’s displeasure with *The Philanderer* in his later years was surely that it did not neatly fit into his theory of Creative Evolution in the way that, say, *Man and Superman* did. In the earlier play, Shaw was “shooting from the hip,” if you will, for he had not yet developed the vocabulary of Creative Evolution and the *Übermensch*. The confessedly autobiographical nature of *The Philanderer* was also an embarrassment to him. Those who claim that the play is a self-flattering vindication of Shaw’s own philandering have not read it very closely. The character of Charteris is a severe self-criticism, whether it was conscious or not. The play remains dark and unpleasant for all its wit and humor; it strenuously questions the possibility of progressive human evolution in a way that reminds me of the following words by Ibsen: “Everyone wants their own special revolutions, always in external things. What is really needed is a revolution of the human spirit” (Letter to Georg Brandes, December 20, 1870, in *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, 106-107).

When *The Philanderer* was finally published in 1898, Shaw had already passed the point where he could have written it. The play is alive and attractive precisely because of its roughness, its hardiness, its sincerity; its complex, problematic nature makes it both profound and heartfelt. But, no, this play does not contain the dramatic algebra of *Saint Joan*: Shaw had not yet canonized himself.

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## 9. LOCUS AND LINEAGE.

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Key Analytical Question: “What is the place of a play in a dramatist’s *oeuvre* and in the canon of Euro-American drama generally, and to what extent was this play shaped or influenced by earlier dramatic works by other authors?”

### “The Ruffian on the Stage: *Loot* and Other Dark Comedies by Joe Orton”

MCCLEAVY. The police are for the protection of ordinary people.  
INSPECTOR TRUSCOTT. I don’t know where you pick up these slogans, sir. You must read them on hoardings. (274, *Loot*)

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DR. RANCE. You can’t be a rationalist in an irrational world.  
It isn’t rational. (428, *What the Butler Saw*)

Joe Orton wrote only seven plays before his death in 1967 at the age of thirty-four. John Russell Taylor and Benedict Nightingale, among others, have argued on the basis of the plays themselves, as well as their small number, that Orton’s place in the history of drama is not secure. I cannot agree with them, but I will grant that John Lahr’s biography, published in 1978, aided their cause by overstating the case for Orton and by too often connecting the plays with his life instead of with the life of the drama. This is, of course, the occupational hazard of critical biography, but it is especially dangerous in a book about a writer whose achievement had just begun to be debated.

C. W. E. Bigsby himself sees the plays as springing in part from Orton’s experience as a homosexual in post-World War II England, but he then wisely goes on to see them in light of the work of postmodernists (Bigsby’s term) in other art forms besides the drama. Lahr made the mistake of regarding Orton’s homosexuality as special; Bigsby views it as one response among others by

artists to an arbitrary, irrational, and violent world, and he elucidates the vision of that world contained in Orton's plays.

Bigsby's *Joe Orton* draws on the vocabulary of the deconstructionists at the same time as it never loses sight of its real subject: the playwright and his place in recent dramatic history. Describing the postmodernist impulse that, in his view, Orton shared, Bigsby writes the following:

Perhaps for historical reasons (the literal reduction of the human body to inanimate object or ash in the battles, the firestorms, and the concentration camps of the Second World War . . .) but also because of changing theories of the status of the subject and of the word, notions of a clearly defined place for the human figure, of the integrity of the human form, of an implied contract between individual and society or men and things, no longer seem self-evident constituents of art. (14)

Whereas the modernists, according to Bigsby, retreated from the social and moral chaos of the world into the unity and beauty of art, from the ephemeral into the eternal, the postmodernists absorbed that chaos into their work. Thus character is deconstructed in the fiction, say, of Pynchon, Hawkes, and Robbe-Grillet; the painting of Johns, Pollock, Oldenberg, and Lichtenstein presents a world in which the *surface* is the reality, a post-moral world. The plays of Beckett and Ionesco disassemble and distance the human figure, displaying it in a world of deforming absurdities. For Orton himself, the power of dramatic character "is broken primarily because [character] no longer has authority in the anxious world outside art" (18). Orton's view of dramatic character was clearly influenced by the absence of authority or autonomy in his own life, since homosexuality was a crime in England until 1967 and, as a druguser in addition, he was often the victim of police harassment. His strategy for survival was to retreat into a mannered role-playing that he then proposed as a model for social survival as well as artistic creation.

The problem with Bigsby's view is not that he is wrong about Orton, or in his description of postmodernism, but that he fails to point out that what he calls postmodernism began in the nineteenth century. It is generally known simply as the modern tradition, and embraces authors who retreat from the disorder of the world for the purpose of creating their own, often visionary orders, as well as those who absorb the world's chaos into their work. In the drama, Yeats would fit into the former category, whereas Pirandello, in his fragmentation of character, belongs in the latter. Jarry fits into both categories: he dispenses with character psychology and a causal plot structure—indeed, with the idea of reality itself—to create a private,

esoteric model within which to write drama. Bigsby sees Orton's relation to Beckett and Ionesco, it's true, but he fails to perceive how the work of all three men is the extension of an avant-garde tradition that bridges two centuries. Although this is an embarrassing omission, Bigsby's keen analytical abilities and his contrasting of Orton's plays with conventional farce make up partly for his view of mid-twentieth-century drama as a unique response to a universe suddenly discovered to be "absurd."

Bigsby makes the important point about farce that it has always been occupied with the deconstruction of character, with the creation of an almost hysterical intensity in which character is flung off by the sheer centrifugal force of language and action. As such, it is potentially a principal outlet for the modernist impulse (I prefer to use the more encompassing term "modernist" rather than Bigsby's misleading "postmodernist"). More important, perhaps, is Bigsby's contention—which should have led him directly to Pirandello and as far back as the Germans Tieck and Grabbe, that the theater is better suited to the exploration of modernist concerns than the novel, because it "constitutes a naturally reflexive setting . . . the stage remains clearly in evidence . . . The role-playing of the actors offers a constant reminder of the role-playing of the audience, [of its] status *as* an audience" (15).

Perhaps sensing that the theater could accommodate his aims more effectively than the novel, Orton abandoned fiction-writing in the early 1960s (only *Head to Toe* was published, posthumously, in 1971) to compose farces. His achievement in plays such as *Loot* (written 1964; staged 1966; filmed 1970) and *What the Butler Saw* (written 1967; staged 1969) was

to give farce a new meaning, to make it something more than the coy trysting with disorder it had once been. For Orton, farce became both an expression of anarchy and its only antidote. In his plays, role-playing is not a series of false surfaces concealing a real self; it is the total meaning or unmeaning of protagonists who survive by refusing all substance. (17)

Bigsby sees Orton's plays as comment on farce form as much as on the world outside them. Traditional farce, according to him, "derives its effect from the re-establishment of rationality and structure after a simulated flirting with formlessness" (33). Orton reflects on or even ridicules the form in *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* by restoring order of a most suspicious kind. In the former play, in a reversal of the standard mystery as well as farce, Inspector Truscott agrees to divide the "loot" with the criminals and send the innocent McLeavy to prison. In the latter play, after a series of mistaken identities, Geraldine and Nicholas are discovered to be the twin offspring of Prentice and his wife; unfortunately, this now means that Prentice has

attempted to rape his daughter and that Nicholas did rape his mother. There has not been a “simulated flirting with formlessness” in *What the Butler Saw*; in fact, laws have been violated and taboos smashed. We have witnessed rape, incest, and physical injury, not the harmless flirtation, sexual misadventure, and offended sensibilities of conventional farce.

The highly elaborate plots of *What the Butler Saw* and of the earlier *Funeral Games* (written 1966; televised 1968) can themselves be seen, believes Bigsby, “as a deliberate attempt to parody the very structure of farce” (56-57), if not of the whole narrative tradition in literature. To Orton, plot was suspect, because it implied a specious rationalism, an illusion of natural order with metaphysical and social implications; it was a balm to the middle classes, little more. He parodied not only plot, but also title: although *What the Butler Saw* sounds like the title of a typical farce, in actuality it has nothing to do with events in the play.

Orton did not begin by writing the anarchic farces for which he has become best known. His first plays, *The Ruffian on the Stair* (written 1963; radio version 1964; stage version 1966) and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (written 1963; staged 1964), were black comedies written under the influence of Pinter and Beckett. They poke fun at the volatile, confusing, neurotic, and diminished world of contemporary existence, yet they do so at the expense of its pathetic victims, characters who possess an emotional dimension—unlike those in *Loot*, *The Erpingham Camp* (written 1965; televised 1966; staged 1967), *Funeral Games*, and *What the Butler Saw*. Between the schismatic world of *Sloane*’s parody on the Oedipal theme and the unified vision of the anarchic farces, *The Good and Faithful Servant* (written 1964; televised 1967; staged 1971), for its part, occupies a middle ground in Orton’s brief career, since it treats the worker Buchanan sympathetically at the same time that it satirizes the impersonal and rigid corporate system at whose hands he was destroyed.

The pathetic Sloane himself has no relatives and was orphaned at the age of eight by parents who both died at the same time—and therefore seem to have committed suicide. “It was the lack of privacy [in the orphanage] I found most trying,” he says, “and the lack of real love” (67). Tellingly, the only husband and wife mentioned in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* are Sloane’s parents. Kath and Ed do have a father, Kemp, but he and his son haven’t spoken for twenty years, and his daughter treats him as if he were a naughty little boy.

Kath and Ed allow Sloane to get away with killing their father in return for sexual favors: he will spend six months of the year with the heterosexual Kath and six months with the homosexual Ed “as long as the agreement lasts” (148). The first man Sloane killed was Kemp’s boss, who was apparently a

homosexual. Sloane says that the boss “wanted to photo me. For certain interesting features I had that he wanted the exclusive right of preserving. You know how it is. I didn’t like to refuse. No harm in it I suppose. But then I got to thinking” (125).

Kath, at forty-one or forty-two years old, is old enough to be Sloane’s mother. In fact, she had a son when she was young by Tommy, Ed’s best friend and lover at the time. She says to Sloane, “You’re almost the same age as he would be” (68). Kath gave the boy up for adoption and she and Tommy never married. The implication is that Sloane is in fact her son. Sloane, Ed’s new lover, himself gets Kath pregnant; they won’t marry, either, and she will probably give her baby up for adoption. Ed arranged the adoption of Tommy’s son, and there is no reason to believe that he will not do the same for Sloane’s—a fetus that Ed predictably refers to as “him” (147).

In his introduction to *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*, John Lahr wrote that “Sloane feels no guilt and his refusal to experience shame is what disturbs and amuses audiences. Sloane is a survivor whose egotism is rewarded, not punished” (16). Sloane’s excessive ego—perhaps the ironic byproduct of his being orphaned at an early age—is rewarded by other egotistical, unloved characters. All three, Sloane, Ed, and Kath, substitute sex for love. It is no accident that the Kemp home stands alone in the midst of a rubbish dump—“it was intended to be the first of a row,” says the old man (72). It is a home without love that begets a bastard who himself begets a bastard.

Lahr said that Orton, in his depiction of characters like Kath, Ed, and Sloane, “was not being heartless, merely accurate” (16): in their rapaciousness, ignorance, and violence, these people are the representative products of our age. No wonder Orton has an old woman make “a special trip [all the way from Woolwich] with her daughter in order to dump a bedstead” (72) outside the Kemp house. It is as if the woman is exhorting her daughter not to risk the marriage bed in times inhospitable to families and children—times peopled by the likes of this dwelling’s occupants.

In her last conversation with Ed, the pregnant Kath, wanting to spend time with Sloane that should be allotted to Ed according to their agreement, says, “It deepens the relationship if the father is there [present at the birth of his child].” Ed replies, “It’s all any reasonable child can expect if the dad is present at the conception. Let’s hear no more of it” (149). This is wildly funny. But it is also profoundly disturbing, because prophetic: writing a parody on the Oedipal theme in 1963, Orton foresaw at the same time the age of test-tube babies, sperm banks, surrogate mothers, single-parent families, and adoptive gay or lesbian couples—the very age in which we are now living.

C. W. E. Bigsby rightly sees the Joe Orton of the anarchic farces as far more radical than the “angry young men” of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Such British “angries” as John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, among others, saw art as a form of social protest. They responded, according to Bigsby,

to a profound sense of social and moral dislocation . . . but the tone was one of bewilderment rather than revolt. . . . No serious doubts were cast on the need for authority, for social institutions, for a system against which the individual could prove himself and define an identity. [These] writers were searching in one way or another for some form of certainty, some structure that would make sense of the neurotic compulsions of modern life; their art was both an expression of this need and itself a paradigm of the structured world they sought. (50-51)

Orton, by contrast, like many modernists before him, saw art as a form of revolt against the inhumanity and compartmentalization of contemporary life. He argued for disorder, believing in his life as well as his art that true liberation may lie in cutting loose from the moral world rather than trying to reconstruct it, in abandoning liberal notions of individual identity and social responsibility. In the face of demands for conformity and suppression by authority in a universe devoid of meaning and purpose, the only correct response, for Orton, was to dissemble and practice the gratification of ambition as well as desire.

Ironically, the creed by which this playwright lived and wrote is the one by which he died: he was bludgeoned to death by Kenneth Halliwell, his lover for sixteen years, who then killed himself. The latter was obsessively jealous of his boyfriend’s literary success, youthful good looks, charming personality, and voracious sexual appetite—for others. Against great odds Orton has risen from the gutter of Leicester (his hometown), and created himself anew; but Halliwell was watching him the whole time and finally struck him down for it.

In my view, the continued reluctance of some to value Joe Orton’s art is comparable to the reluctance of critics, then and now, to esteem Restoration comedy, its nearest generic ancestor before the comedies of Oscar Wilde. Orton’s plays—like Congreve’s and Wycherley’s and later Wilde’s, to whose *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) *What the Butler Saw* is close in spirit and sometimes in detail—are designed to negate the conventional assurances of art and to corrode the link between that art and the assumptions of liberal humanism. In fact the work of all four dramatists is a form of social criticism, but through subversion of conventional morality, not through a call for the correction of societal abuses: that is why the plays of Congreve, Wycherley, Wilde, and Orton are sometimes criticized.

Orton’s *Loot*, for example, may satirize institutions such as the police



and the Catholic Church, but what is important is that the vehicles of this satire themselves remain unaffected by it. Indeed, the play could be said to dramatize the triumph of evil: of greed, corruption, brutality, immorality or amorality, and sacrilege. Inspector Truscott and Hal, for instance, get no comeuppance in the end, which is what makes *Loot* so unsettling. Orton fiendishly satirizes authority through Truscott, yet Truscott—at once the object and vehicle of the playwright's scorn—gets away easily with beating suspects, taking bribes, and in general abusing his power. He may be stupid in some ways, but his stupidity never gets him into any real trouble. And I think that this is Orton's point: the Truscotts of this world need to be satirized, yet it must also simultaneously be pointed out that the Truscotts of this world often go completely unpunished for their crimes. Orton thus makes us laugh at Truscott at the same time as he makes us realize that a Truscott is oblivious to our laughter, and will continue in his corrupt ways well beyond the confines of the drama.

This British dramatist has gone beyond farce in *Loot* in the sense that he has exploited the attractiveness of evil for audiences—paradoxically, the same bourgeois audiences at whom he is striking back. Orton proves to us in this play that we can be amused by behavior we would normally deplore, and that we can even attend raptly as evil goes unpunished. There are dire consequences in *Loot*, as there are not in traditional farce—Hal gets a severe beating, Mr. McLeavy will probably die (of old age) in prison for a crime he did not commit—and Orton's art, or dramatic sleight of hand, is to make us *not care* while we are watching. We think about what we have witnessed only later, after we have been “taken”—like Hal, Fay, and Dennis at the conclusion of the play. Truscott leaves with the money, and these characters are left to wonder if they will ever see any of it again, or how he managed to walk off with it all in the first place.

What Orton shows us, then, in *Loot*, as in other of his plays, is that evil, in the right amounts, has, in Bert States's words, the “power to arrest for our delight certain bold lines of force which goodness simply doesn't possess” (483). This is the logical extension of Baudelaire's own remark that laughter and grief are “intimately linked with the accident of the ancient Fall” (451)—that is, with the introduction of evil or sin into the world. Good, as such, is boring, because it is relatively undramatic; evil, by contrast, is endlessly fascinating and suspenseful. Good is self-sustaining, whereas evil is self-destructive: there is always the possibility that two evils will cancel each other out and that we will be left with—nothing. This is one of the reasons we attend to evil, anticipating its sudden and spectacular demise.

What playwrights like Joe Orton and his “serious” counterpart, Harold Pinter, do for evil is almost to remove it from the sphere of morality and raise



it to the level of respectability, as something worthy of careful examination. (Orton claimed, incidentally, that the subversively sexual nature of Pinter's *The Homecoming* [1965] was influenced by his first two plays, *The Ruffian on the Stair* and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*.) We don't judge evil: we watch it do its work. I do not know whether we can speak of this kind of dramatic writing as morally good or bad. But it *is* a kind of achievement, the using up of one more artistic possibility. Beyond this, *Loot* is a reaction against, nearly a destruction of, artistic forms that have preceded it—traditional farce and satire, on the one hand, and melodrama with its happy ending and omniscient authority figure, on the other—and thus it is always in danger, like the evil it portrays, of going too far and destroying *itself*.

Consider, for example, how far *Loot* goes in its “using up,” if not parodying, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601). In his own discussion of parallels between Orton's *Loot* and *Hamlet*, Manfred Draudt himself surprisingly neglects to mention the most obvious parallel: both Old Hamlet and Mrs. McLeavy have been poisoned by individuals seeking to marry their spouses for individual gain. Draudt even fails to mention the direct evidence in *Loot* that Orton was thinking of *Hamlet* when he wrote his farce: twice a tavern called “The King of Denmark” is referenced in the play (213, 266). It is thus no accident that the licensee of The King of Denmark sends a wreath to Mrs. McLeavy's funeral: it is as if Old Hamlet were thereby commiserating with Mrs. McLeavy for having been betrayed in the same way he was. Nor is it an accident that we are told in *Loot* that the truth is always spoken (under the influence of drink) at The King of Denmark: when Old Hamlet returns to Elsinore as a ghost, he himself tells the truth about how he died, whereas Claudius has lied about his murderous actions toward the previous king.

Perhaps the most fascinating parallel between *Loot* and *Hamlet* is between Truscott and Hamlet himself. Draudt does not connect these two characters, seeing Orton himself as Hamlet's parallel:

There remain fundamental differences between the plays, one of them being the fact that in Shakespeare's play it is always the dramatic character, Hamlet, who attacks and unmasks the hypocrisy of the court of Elsinore, whereas in *Loot* it is the author, Joe Orton, who levels his criticism at the audience and the society outside and not within the world of the play. (206)

Although Draudt's assertion is true, I believe that it is more productive to compare Hamlet and Truscott.

Inspector Truscott is an anti-Hamlet. He comes to the McLeavy home looking for Dennis and Hal, whom he suspects of having robbed a bank next to a funeral parlor. But once he sees Fay—whose career as a murderess he has

been following for some years and about whom he has even written a book—he suspects her of having murdered Mrs. McLeavy so that she could marry Mr. McLeavy, kill *him*, and inherit his money. (Fay has murdered seven former husbands in less than a decade for the same purpose.) Truscott exposes Fay, even as Hamlet finally exposes Claudius, but the inspector neither kills nor even arrests her, for the evidence that would convict her—the remains of Mrs. McLeavy’s stomach—has been destroyed in an automobile wreck.

Truscott ends up concealing Dennis and Hal’s robbery for a share of the loot; in fact, as previously noted, he leaves the stage with all the money from the robbery in his possession. He has revealed himself as a thoroughly corrupt and brutal detective, one who could blithely declare, “The safest place for this [loot] is in my locker at the station. It’s a maxim of the force: ‘Never search your own backyard—you may find what you’re looking for’” (275). Truscott comes to the McLeavy home ostensibly to seek the truth and leaves by concealing it, materially richer for his improbity. Hamlet, by contrast, completely roots out the corruption in Denmark, and he dies in the end for his revelations.

There are similarities even in the names of Truscott and Hamlet. Let’s begin with *Hamlet*, which is set in a castle in the city of Elsinore, Denmark. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.67; 1684); the rottenness had its beginnings in Elsinore; and it now has evil repercussions for the whole of the country. The character Hamlet’s name literally signifies “an enclosed area” (*-let* is a diminutive suffix), like the castle or like Elsinore itself, which we can presume was an enclosed city that was surrounded by walls for protection from invaders. Hamlet, then, embodies the castle-city that he would cleanse of infection or rot.

Significantly, McLeavy calls attention to Truscott’s name the first time he hears it: “What the Hell kind of name is that? Is it an anagram? You are not bloody human, that’s for sure. We are being made the victims of some kind of interplanetary rag” (248). Although “Truscott” is not an anagram, it does signify something besides its bearer’s name. A “truss” can be a rigid framework of beams, girders, struts, bars, and the like for supporting a roof; a “cot” can be a covered place or a small shelter. Put together, “truss” and “cot” can therefore signify a room in a house, in this case in the state of England. *Loot* takes place entirely in one room, and Truscott is at pains at several points in the play to keep anyone from leaving it while he considers the evidence of crime.

Similar to Hamlet, then, Truscott embodies in his name the room-house to which he has come, he would have us believe, to solve a crime. He leaves Fay, Hal, and Dennis in the room at the end, and he leaves McLeavy in another “room,” a jail cell—having added to, not cleansed, the corruption he

has uncovered. Through Truscott Orton has managed to satirize the excessive stock that the English place in bureaucratic authority—so much so that even Truscott’s name becomes ironic if syllabified after the “u.” For he is hardly a “true Scott,” a representative of the unassailable integrity of Scotland Yard. Hamlet, by contrast, is the noblest and truest of Danes.

In this way, one gets the uncanny feeling throughout a reading or production of *Loot* that the next introduction of character—and character name—the next line of dialogue, or the next bit of action will simply be too much and the play will end abruptly and abortively. It never does, of course, but the play’s very potential for suddenly “exploding” its form keeps us on the every edge of our seats, waiting and watching in utter astonishment—astonishment at the elaboration.

Joe Orton may be telling us basic things in *Loot*, then, about the ways in which art works, or the ways in which we respond to art, which we didn’t know before or have not considered in a long time. Surely Orton himself did not count on such an “astonished” response to his work: in his own day his plays were either liked or loathed for their *satirical* stance. Just as surely, he would have been tickled by such a favorable reaction, for it is at a far remove from the liberal humanist conception of the response that “vile art” should engender.

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## “David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and Selling in American Drama”

David Mamet’s rise to the forefront of American drama has been seen as the triumph of a minimalist, the most obvious component of whose signature style is his dialogue. (Only Sam Shepard has a comparably emphatic signature style, but his depends less on the shape and sound of words than on an offbeat, sometimes surreal use of scenic elements.) A reification of the Chicago idiom, that dialogue is carefully heightened—its degree of ebullience or rhythmic confidence being almost always in proportion, paradoxically, to the extent to which the speaker has been denatured by his social role (a denaturing apparent in the sheer number of obscenities employed).

As for the other salient feature of Mamet’s work, his minimalism, it is evident in the compactness of his dialogue, the relative “plotlessness” of his plays, and their dearth of stage directions as well as descriptions. Such minimalism has strong European parallels, and the downbeat tone of Mamet’s drama—its articulation of a poetics of loss without any patent compensatory dimension—together with the palpable stasis of many of his endings, does seem to derive from the theater of Pinter, Beckett, and the Absurdist. But, unlike them, Mamet is more a realist-cum-naturalist and therefore a moralist, who is filled with dismay at the obsolescence and covert predatoriness of certain American myths, particularly the frontier myth as domesticated in the boys’ fiction of Horatio Alger.

*American Buffalo* (1975) was the work that established Mamet as a major voice in the contemporary American theater and framed the distinctive qualities of his drama—qualities that would later be quintessentially reprised in the even more powerful *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983). These are a nearly exclusionary focus on the sleazy world of masculine power, bonding, and betrayal; a meticulous deployment of his characters’ urban vernacular such that, through their fractured utterances and pauses, Mamet is able to chart their inner conflicts and psychological shifts; an examination of the influence of the myths and archetypes of popular culture upon America’s citizens; and a recurring concern with the world of American business in its tawdrier incarnations (where even morality is bartered as a commodity).

Set in a rundown, claustrophobic junk shop in Chicago, *American Buffalo* delineates the symbolic relationships among three men who plan the robbery of a valuable buffalo nickel, only to have their plot go awry. Inhabiting an inner city of resident hotels, cheap diners, and pawnshops, Don, Teach, and Bobby are petty crooks without the intelligence or forethought necessary

actually to carry out the robbery they propose. Indeed, their strategies for the break-in, which swing between the starkly vicious and the hilariously incompetent, ensure that their venture never gets off the ground. But the projected heist does serve to illuminate the values of these characters and to focus attention on the nature of their friendship. For these three low-lives are willing to betray each other on behalf of “business” principles that are, in fact, nothing more than selfish moves to achieve material advantage. In the process, they evoke the same hypocritical pieties and maxims as might any big-time businessman in a corporate boardroom.

Thus does Mamet imply that an entire society—of high-life, low-life, and the middle class in between—is engaged in the pursuit of monetary gain to such an extent that it has supplanted or perverted all other forms of behavior. Even in the midst of their ethical confusion and essential isolation, however, Don, Teach, and Bobby long for the compassionate interaction that their own actions constantly subvert, for the humane connection that they have sacrificed for mere survival in the competitive rat-race known as rampant capitalism. This is *American Buffalo*’s pathos, and what makes its otherwise brilliant rendering of callousness and greed, of failed communication, clumsy manipulation, and casual venality, so compelling.

Other plays by Mamet deal more positively with the possibilities of genuine communion in love or friendship. *A Life in the Theatre* (1977) and *Lakeboat* (1970; revised, 1980) are male rite-of-passage dramas and studies of mentor-protégé relationships in which the protégé moves beyond the mentor or removes himself from the mentor’s sphere. *Reunion* (1976) depicts the tender meeting between an estranged father and daughter who have not seen each other for twenty years. *The Shawl* (1985) builds to an unexpected communion between a supposed clairvoyant and the wealthy woman he had earlier planned to cheat out of her fortune. *Edmond* (1982), for its part, presents a more complex and even ironic pattern in which “communion” for the protagonist is only reached on the other side of murder, in jail, in a homosexual bond with a black prisoner.

Yet another group of Mamet plays shows nascent love between men and women destroyed by a complicated array of forces not limited to the business “ethic” that dominates *American Buffalo*. In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), the romance between an inexperienced pair of lovers is soured not only by the dog-eat-dog atmosphere of the downtown office scene, but also by their own pettiness, hesitancy, and reserve as well as the cynical ministrations of each one’s older, same-sex mentor figure. In *The Woods* (1977), Mamet focuses exclusively on two lovers in an isolated cabin, revealing the emotional insecurity together with the metaphysical terror of a male on the verge of deeper commitment. And in *Speed-the-Plow* (1988; followed in 1989 by a sequel



titled *Bobby Gould in Hell*), an attraction between a temporary secretary and a jaded film producer is torpedoed by his “buddy,” a self-seeking Hollywood agent who decides that the woman’s feelings are motivated only by her ego in the promotion of a script, or artistic “property.”

The cutthroat world of Hollywood executives is not so different from the equally ruthless milieu of real-estate salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, who also peddle properties if they do not engage (onstage at least) in the exploitation, objectification, or manipulation of women. But in the process of peddling those useless properties (several of which are referred to in the play’s snappy but empty title), the salesmen exploit, objectify, and manipulate one another; like the characters in *American Buffalo*, albeit at a somewhat higher level, they sacrifice friendship for money, fellowship for commerce, getting along for getting ahead. Mamet may express his moral outrage at the various salesmen’s tactics and actions, but he also communicates his paradoxical respect for their manic energy, endless resourcefulness, and persistent ability to bounce back. Their struggle for something like existence, for triumph even, within the language they speak creates the real dynamic of this biting, funny, harrowing, finally purgative play. And that grinding, salty, relentless language—stripped of all idealistic pretenses and liberal pieties—is what stays in the audience’s mind long after a reading or viewing of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The play is readily available for viewing, since it was filmed in 1992 (though with changes designed to make the salesmen more sympathetic and their world less dark), as was *American Buffalo* in 1996 and *Oleanna* in 1994.

One of Mamet’s most controversial works, *Oleanna* was first performed on stage in 1992 and investigates the issue of sexual harassment—particularly as it gets played out in an American academy undergoing profound and interrelated social and economic transformations. Mamet’s treatment of women in his earlier plays has sometimes drawn fire, and his depiction of Carol, the student in his drama, continues to garner its share. Even the successful female psychologist of his best original screenplay, *House of Games* (which he also directed, in 1987), came under attack by feminists: for she becomes a compulsive thief after being duped, financially as well as sexually, by a gangster and then murdering him in revenge.

Perhaps the later *Boston Marriage* (1999) was Mamet’s reaction to such criticism, as it examined a blue-blood Victorian relationship between two women and signaled yet another new direction for this, the most protean as well as Promethean of contemporary dramatists. Then again, that new direction still included—and includes—some of the most ferocious, most unbuttoned, most politically incorrect racial and religious slurs in recent American drama, as evidenced by Mamet’s *Romance* (2005), a legal farce in the tradition of the Marx Brothers that features Jewish, Gentile, and homosexual



characters against the background of a peace conference between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Ironically, or perhaps aptly, *Romance* opened in New York at the same time as the staccato realism of *Glengarry Glen Ross* was being revived on Broadway—and was followed by such provocative Mamet play titles as *Keep Your Pantheon* (2007), *The Vikings and Darwin* (2008), *Race* (2009), and *The Anarchist* (2012).

Let me give a detailed consideration here of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the subject of salesmen or selling. *Glengarry Glen Ross* has two, very different acts. In its three scenes, the first act offers three variations, each cast in duet-form, on the theme of persuasion. The setting is a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. In scene one, Shelley “the Machine” Levene, once a leading salesman but now fading badly, tries with increasing desperation to get the office manager, John Williamson, to give him the best “leads,” or appointments with prospective customers—resorting eventually to (but not succeeding in) bribery. In the second scene, the mutually consoling gestures made by the frustrated no-hoper Moss toward the already defeated Aaronow turn out to be a tactic designed to compromise the latter man—by involving him in a plan to rob the real-estate office and sell the “hot” leads. Scene three, like scene two, also involves deception in tandem with persuasion. Richard Roma, the current star salesman and “ruler” of the office, first hypnotizes a milquetoast called Link with some unbuttoned philosophizing, then pounces on his sales prey. Roma seemed to be relaxing as he talked, but in fact he was artfully doing his job. The top prize of a Cadillac in the office selling-contest is almost his. (The second man wins a set of steak knives, while the bottom two salesmen get fired.)

Act II harnesses and combines the dynamic energy of these three encounters in a more or less conventional plot structure. It is the next morning, the real-estate office or “boiler room” has been ransacked, and the leads have been stolen. Throughout the act the salesmen are called into an adjoining room for questioning by a detective named Baylen. Levene joins Aaronow, Moss, and Roma in the office, where he wants to celebrate and recount his “closing” of a big sale—which is later revealed to be a dud. Then Link arrives to cancel Roma’s sale to *him*. Roma stalls with Levene’s clever help, but when Williamson mentions that this customer’s check has already been cashed, Link rushes out and the deal is doomed. Williamson is abusively berated for opening his mouth, first by Roma and next by Levene, but when the latter lets slip that he knows Williamson lied about the check, he betrays his own guilt for the robbery. Only the thief could have known that Link’s check, instead of being deposited at the bank, remained sitting on the office manager’s desk. Williamson reports Levene to the police. Levene squeals on Dave Moss. And Roma resumes his predatory quest for the Cadillac—but

not before making sure that he takes financial advantage of the pathetic, defenseless Levene.

Such an account of the plot of *Glengarry Glen Ross* barely hints at the linguistic virtuosity of Mamet's writing. There is a rich orchestration of voices, sounding the whirling idiom of sales-speak—"leads," "sits," "closes," "boards," "streaks"—which is rhythmically sustained by a constant stream of highly expressive obscenities. The very opacity of the language—its ellipses, parataxis, and concealment (as opposed to exposition)—makes us aware of speech as *act*, as something that functions rhetorically rather than as a lucid medium of transmission or communication. For the salesman is a rhetorician whose job hinges on the power of speech, the act of utterance, the theater of the word. Whatever the words used, the rhythms, the tones, the pauses, the fragments are designed to bully, to cajole, to advance, to retreat, to seduce, to impress. ("High-speed Pinter," wrote one reviewer, and Harold Pinter happens to be the play's dedicatee.) As Mamet himself has said, "The salesmen [where I once worked] were primarily performers. They went into people's living rooms and performed their play about investment properties" (quoted in Dean, 212), just as Roma improvises one fiction after another in order to snare Lingk. Indeed, these men seem never to stop performing, even when they are alone with one another: aggressive selling has become for them not merely a profession but a means of *being*, to the point that they are imprisoned within the sales-talking lingo of their lives.

The fiction that the salesmen play out among themselves concerns the "frontier ethic." This is the idea that success is attained not only through self-reliance and hard work, through the drive and initiative of the rugged individualist, but also through the partnership, dependability, and fellowship of other men. Thus Levene can declare at one point that "You have to believe in yourself" (67), and at another that "your partner *depends* on you . . . you have to go *with* him and *for* him . . . you can't exist alone" (98). The predatory individualism of these men, however, introduces an inevitable, irremediable contradiction into the frontier ethic, which then becomes a vehicle for the domination of others in relationships founded on professional rivalry. Originally practiced at the expense of the Indians as well as other Americans, the frontier ethic in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is practiced at the expense of bottom-feeders like George Aaronow and their cliental counterparts—like James Lingk. He desperately needs to believe in something or someone and is conned into thinking that, through the existential act of purchase, he is affirming his essential, authentic being. What he buys, ironically, is the very land that was once taken from the Indians and has itself become a waste product of our Manifest Destiny.

Often called a *Death of a Salesman* for the 1980s, *Glengarry Glen Ross* may

surpass Arthur Miller's play in its assault on the American way of making a living, for it launches that assault without a single tendentious line, without a trace of sentiment, with no social generalizations. At once savage and compassionate, trenchant and implicit, radical and stoical, sad and comic, Mamet's drama does not feature any deaths at its conclusion. A worse death has already begun for its salesmen, who are metaphorical rather than literal victims of a merciless and venal economic system. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (published 1940, produced 1946) do feature deaths at their conclusions, and these two plays about selling call for some discussion, as does Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—yet another drama that has a salesman as one of its principal figures and that, along with the other two, makes up a triumvirate of the most important plays of the 1940s.

Drawing on the cultural archetype of the salesman at a time when America was proudly emerging as the richest and most powerful country on earth, Miller, O'Neill, and Williams exposed the contradictions underlying our apparent success (even as Mamet chose to do so during the booming eighties, when "greed was good"). In all three of their plays, significantly, it is at most vague as to what the salesmen are actually selling. As is well known, we never find out what Willy Loman is selling. We know that Stanley Kowalski travels for an unnamed firm that apparently manufactures and markets some kind of machinery, since we hear that Mitch works "on the precision bench in the spare parts department. At the plant Stanley travels for" (40)—which is all we ever hear of it. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill describes Hickey as a "hardware drummer," but we get no further details about his hardware, which seems to have to do more with sex or death ("hardware" being a slang term for, among other things, that archetypal phallic symbol, a gun) than with any real product. Willy Loman, Stanley Kowalski, and Hickey, then, are disassociated from the merchandise they sell. And the vagueness of their products underlines the allegorical nature of their selling; each is an American everyman, in an America where what is produced becomes ever less tangible, ever more removed from reality. These three don't sell "stuff," they sell illusion—or themselves in the form of their winning personalities.

Oddly enough, however, these three salesmen don't see themselves in this way. All three consider themselves clear-eyed realists, devoted to a reality that seems as tangible to them, in the 1940s, as the Brooklyn Bridge. The salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* are realists, too, out for all they can get and having no scruples about how they get it; their amorality, particularly in the case of Roma, is the very source of their charm. But these three salesmen of the forties are not amoral; they all have a similar moral code consisting of a stern belief in the necessity of rejecting illusion and facing up to reality.

They not only are realists, they preach realism, too—sell it, if you will. Unfortunately for them and those around them, however, their “reality” is an imaginary one, in the end as treacherous as the illusions the salesmen are out to destroy.

Stanley Kowalski himself seems cruder than the other two salesmen. His animal nature is much remarked upon: he drinks beer, copulates, plays games, smashes light bulbs, paws through Blanche’s wardrobe, throws plates on the floor, even commits rape. Yet he doesn’t just do these things aimlessly or impulsively. His objective is always to deflate pretense: “Look at these feathers and furs that she [Blanche] come here to preen herself in!” (35). He is proud of having pulled Stella “down off them columns” of Belle Reve, and wants to pull Blanche down off them, too. He is also proud of being Polish, being American, being a Louisianan under the Napoleonic code. As Stanley bellows to his wife and sister-in-law, “What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said—‘Every Man is a King!’” (107). Even his rape of Blanche seems motivated more by a desire to pierce her illusions than her body. Stanley is a dark version of the salesman, selling the idealistic Blanche a harsh reality on the specious grounds that it is somehow good for her, and willing to use force, if necessary, to make the sale.

Willy Loman is a more sympathetic figure than Stanley Kowalski, but ultimately he is even more destructive. His vision of reality is that simply being “well liked” is the key to all worldly and spiritual success: “It’s not what you do, Ben. It’s who you know and the smile on your face! It’s contacts, Ben, contacts! . . . That’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (86). On the face of it, this is a remarkably cynical philosophy, glorifying personal contacts while scorning traditional values like education and hard work. The odd thing about Willy, however, is that he does not think of these views as cynical, but rather as something fine, “the wonder of this country.” In other words, like Stanley and, as we shall see shortly, Hickey, he is another realist, preaching his own ideal.

Another odd aspect of Willy is that his views don’t seem to convince anybody else in the play, any more than they do the audience. Charley, for example, counters Willy’s modern view with a more traditional cynicism: “Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he’d look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked” (97). Furthermore, Willy’s philosophy is proved wrong over and over again in the play, as applied to his sons Biff and Happy, to Bernard the boy next door, and to Willy himself, who ends up feeling lonely and not well liked by anybody. “You are the saddest, self-centeredest soul I ever did see-saw,” says the tellingly perceptive Woman in the hotel room, Miller’s

version of the farmer's daughter, who then quickly follows up with the words "Come on inside, drummer boy" (116). Finally, despite all evidence to the contrary, Willy buys his own warped reality for good by killing himself, foolishly convinced that Biff will benefit materially as well as spiritually from his death.

Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* is another realist who preaches his own ideal. Like Willy, he too believes that the key to success is in being well liked: "I'd met a lot of drummers around the hotel and liked 'em. They were always telling jokes. They were sports. They kept moving. I liked their life. And I knew I could kid people and sell things" (233). And sell he did, by playing on people's pipe-dreams and making them like him. Yet, like Willy, Hickey repeatedly complains of being lonely. Like Willy, he has taken up with a woman, or women, other than his wife, a fact that hovers around the play in the form of the sex joke that is never actually told, but which nonetheless gives *The Iceman Cometh* its title. There are several versions of this joke, one of which goes like this: a man comes home and calls upstairs to his wife, "Honey, did the iceman come yet?" "Not yet," she calls back, "but he's breathing hard." The iceman is a salesman who beds another man's wife, and who sells ice—a symbol of coldness, hardness, and death. He is another "realist," a purveyor of the cold, hard truth. In popular slang, to "ice" someone is to kill him, and ultimately Hickey is an iceman too, icing his wife and icing himself in the end.

Like Willy, then, Hickey is ultimately selling death. And who are the suckers doing the buying? Certainly the *Lumpenproletariat* in the bar form a group of them, and Hickey, like Stanley, is trying to sell them a harsh reality, puncturing their pipe-dreams in the way that Stanley brutally punctured Blanche's illusions. In the end, however, the people in the bar aren't buying Hickey's vision, returning to the pipe-dreams that sustain them. In a sense, they are salesmen, too, trying desperately to sell their dreams to anyone who will listen, as well as to themselves. Their pipe-dreams are not just pleasant reveries to sustain them through life's tribulations; they are ideals that they must repeat, over and over, for each sale quickly wears off and creates the challenge to sell yet again.

A notable difference between Hickey and Willy, like that between Roma and Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is that Hickey is a *successful* salesman. That is, he *has* been one, until he takes up trying to sell the reality-ideal. Selling was easy for him, so easy that, unlike Willy, he seems to have unlimited amounts of money, and he certainly has not lost his job. He really was "well liked"; his customers, who readily bought what he sold, did not drop him as he aged—instead, he dropped them. Of course, the biggest sucker of all was his wife, Evelyn, who always bought his slick tales and who always forgave

him, even when he brought her home a case of venereal disease. In the end, Hickey came to hate all the suckers, including Evelyn, and he killed her. It is as if the seller threw the sucker off the Brooklyn Bridge after having sold it to him, in contempt for his being such an easy mark, and then dove in after him, in contempt for himself.

*The Iceman Cometh* makes a more profound statement about American life than *Death of a Salesman* because O'Neill realized, as he also did in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941) and as Mamet was later to realize in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, that the tragedy of America is not a tragedy of failure but rather one of success. Willy clings to his foolish ideal until the very end, despite its obviously having failed him; Hickey rejects that very ideal of fitting in and being liked, because it has succeeded for him too easily and too well. Unfortunately, he substitutes for his ideal another ideal, one more insidious because it seems so concrete and obvious. In the end, however, it is just as manipulative and condescending to destroy people's illusions as it is to feed, or feed off, them. A realism that ignores human suffering is no genuine realism at all.

That kind of selective, blind-eyed realism began, perhaps more than ever before, to characterize America in the 1940s, when the country had reached the pinnacle of its success. The wars that had brought disaster to much of the world did relatively little damage to the United States; in fact, they made the nation stronger and wealthier than ever. At the same time, there was a growing unease in the country. As in Hickey's case, America's success seemed easy, yet finally hollow and frustrating. Why, its citizens plaintively asked, wasn't American success recognized as the solid, realistic achievement it obviously was? Why did alien philosophies like Communism appeal only to those with foolish pipe-dreams? Why did traditional societies not abandon their elaborate social structures, their customs and conventions, their myths and rituals—all foolish pipe-dreams of their own—in favor of the new Capitalist order in which everyone was equal in his opportunity to maximize his gain? Americans, the great pragmatists, apparently would have to sell their brand of realism to the rest of the world for its own good.

This realism, called Capitalism or Free Enterprise, certainly looked solid. What could be more "realistic" than appealing to human acquisitiveness? A society that rejected tradition and culture, turning everyone into a seller or a buyer instead, was tough, strong, genuine, even moral in its way. The rest of the world was populated by old-fashioned idealistic suckers who would have to learn that greed was good. America would sell them its view and destroy their illusions. Americans weren't suckers but do-good traveling salesmen to the whole world. Ultimately, America would try to sell its brand of realism to the Vietnamese, the Nicaraguans, the Salvadorans, even to the Russians,



and then to the Iraqis and Afghanis, never realizing that—like Stanley and Hickey and Willy, Roma, Levene, and Moss—what it was actually selling (and continues to sell) is death.

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## 10. AUTHORSHIP AND ADAPTATION.

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**Key Analytical Question:** “How has one work been wholly or partially adapted from another, as in the case of a play made into a film or even a play derived from other plays, and to what extent are the changes in the new work aesthetically justified?”

### “The Unbearable Light-ness of Being: Gertrude Stein’s *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in Light of Goethe, Marlowe, and the Twentieth Century”

Attempting to categorize or classify the theatrical avant-garde of the early twentieth century is at best problematic. No guaranteed criterion exists that, cutting across misleading chronological boundaries, would permit us to classify this play as being of unquestionable dada inspiration and that play as being of purely surrealist derivation. Considering that most avant-garde movements, both in drama and the plastic arts, sought to explode conventional ideas, labels, and categories—in style as well as genre and form—it seems rather unfair to impose rigid limits on the artistic products of such movements.

However, despite the radical differences among various texts of the period, every avant-garde play can be identified by its disruption of three conventional or traditional dramatic elements: faith in the providential designs of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God as well as a divine monarch; confidence in a psychology of the individual that can cogently link human motives to human acts; and belief in a causality of events, in the idea that people’s actions over time can be closely connected in a logical, almost inevitable sequence. In effect, avant-garde plays replace each of these three elements with its antithesis. If in modern realistic and naturalistic drama, the patriarchal relationship between God and the individual soul was replaced by the adversarial relationship between man and his own psychology, his will to comprehend himself, even as the patriarchal relationship between ruler and

subject was replaced by the adversarial relationship between man and society, in avant-garde drama the action can be governed by something completely outside the triad that links motive to act, act to logical sequence of events, and logical outcome to divine or regal judgment. In other words, God is dead, the King has been deposed, and moral authority as well as metaphysical truth has consequently become relative; psychology itself has been replaced by illogical if not incomprehensible human motivation; and causality has been superseded by the non-linear, sometimes even static, plot.

As I shall attempt to show through an examination of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938), Stein's drama provides ample evidence of these three disruptions of conventional drama, as well as exhibiting similarities to the dadaist and surrealist drama being written and produced in early twentieth-century Paris. Stein's plays evidence not only formal similarities with the products of these artistic movements, they also adopt their modernist world view—which for Stein included feminism, a fascination with cinema, concerns about total or mechanized war, and questions regarding the role of art in the new era. Beyond these interests she shares with her male contemporaries, Stein demonstrates great concern for women as they are represented in art and repeatedly exhibits feminist themes in her work. This feminist focus, presented in the form of avant-garde art, is remarkably similar to that of Hannah Höch, whose visual art used the same fragmentation and montage techniques as other dadaists, but for the purpose (among others) of criticizing typical representations of women in art.

In Stein's writing in general and in her drama in particular, the dominant artistic and cultural trends of the twentieth century thus emerge. Though she is perhaps the least well known of America's twentieth-century playwrights, she is the first genuine avant-garde dramatist of her country. As such, the history of experimental theater and drama in America is virtually inconceivable without her influence. One of America's earliest avant-garde theater groups, for example—the Living Theater—began production in 1951 with Stein's curtainraiser "Ladies' Voices" (1916). Robert Wilson produced her play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in 1992 and, in 1998, the Wooster Group performed its adaptation of Stein's *Doctor Faustus*, titled *House/Lights*. Richard Foreman, for one, has credited Stein as the most significant influence on his work. Anne Bogart's theater and Stan Brakhage's films have built their respective aesthetics upon Stein's principles, and further parallels can be made between Stein and such contemporary, experimental dramatists as Suzan-Lori Parks and María Irene Fornés, not to speak of Adrienne Kennedy before them.

Yet despite her dramatic influence, Stein's plays are rarely studied, even among Stein scholars; similarly, the field of theater studies to date has largely

ignored her dramatic output. It is my contention, however, that Gertrude Stein's drama deserves consideration on its own terms, as drama and as theater. These plays have an interior logic as well as a dramatic progression in which Stein continually works out her vision of modernity and modernism, culminating in her greatest dramatic work, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. At its core, Stein's drama is even prophetic, an artistic herald for the latter half of the twentieth century. Through her use of non-linear language, fragmented characters, and non-narrative "plot," Stein seemingly predicts the rise of non-linear communication (as found on the Internet), even as her art itself was influenced by the horror of weapons of mass destruction and the increasingly technological landscape of the "developed" West. That she has never completely disappeared from our collective theatrical and cultural imagination is only one testament to her enduring influence and artistic significance. The other is her work itself, which continues to excite the imagination, challenge the conventions of language as well as thought, and reflect the state of humanity more than half a century later.

Although Stein clearly played a critical role in the development of experimental playwriting, it is in performance that Stein's influence is most visible and most enduring. Nearly every year for the past decade, another new Stein play or adaptation has appeared on American stages. The operas *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927) and *The Mother of Us All* (1945-46) are regularly performed and her non-dramatic work has been consistently adapted for performance. Indeed, as the American avant-garde moves into the twenty-first century, Stein is an integral part of its theater. Since Robert Wilson's production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in 1992, for example, he has directed two other works by Stein: *Four Saints in Three Acts* in 1996, and *Saints and Singing* (1922) in 1998. And in 1998 the Wooster Group's adaptation of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, *House/Lights*, combined Stein's text with Joseph Mawra's 1964 sexploitation film *Olga's House of Shame*, in a production directed by Elizabeth LeCompte.

Thus, despite the argument that American avant-garde performance has been and continues to be largely anti-textual, Stein's literary influence has been an enduring presence. In fact, it is precisely this apparent incongruity that makes Stein's presence in avant-garde performance so compelling. One might question how a director such as Robert Wilson can baldly state that "You don't have to listen to the words, because words don't mean anything," and yet still claim the word-fixated Stein as a major influence; or why a theater ensemble as visceral and revolutionary as the Living Theater would begin its inaugural season with a playwright as cerebral as Gertrude Stein. Or one could ask how two artists as radically different as Judith Malina and Wilson could both find their origins in Gertrude Stein; while the work of two others,

Meredith Monk and Lee Breuer, is almost always placed in context through reference to Stein. It is in response to such testaments that Stein emerges as more than a great playwright. Stein's writing not only transformed dramatic literature, but her sense of theatricality, expressed both in her drama and in lectures, also profoundly affected American avant-garde performance. It affected criticism as well, changing not only the theater that critics watch, but also the *way* they watch.

But it is primarily with Stein's writing that I am concerned here, as it exhibits its artistry in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. More intellectually accessible than much of her early work, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* blends her unique approach to language and structure with universal themes, which for her included feminist ones. The play represents a transition between the two periods in Stein's enormous dramatic *oeuvre* (over seventy-five works), which Donald Sutherland has described as "The Play as Movement and Landscape, 1922-1932" and "The Melodic Drama, Melodrama, and Opera, 1932-1946" (207). In *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* Stein uses identifiable characters and attributes specific dialogue to them, but the language exhibits all the idiosyncrasies of her earlier work—lack of punctuation, multiple identities for major characters, disembodied voices, punning, non-sequiturs, and repetition. Stein's language now focuses on something other than its own structure; she shifts from a concern with it to such philosophical or metaphysical problems as those of moral value and human identity. Still, she maintains throughout the play a style readily identifiable as her own.

Despite numerous essays that have been published on Stein's drama in general, and on *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in particular, few attempts have been made to connect her plays with other avant-garde drama of the period. (It should be noted here that I refer exclusively to the theatrical avant-garde. There is a wide range of essays connecting Stein's poetry, fiction and drama with cubism and other avant-garde painting and visual art, most especially that of Picasso. However, few of these studies discuss Stein's drama in the context of dada or surrealist performance or any of the numerous theoretical writings of fellow avant-garde writers.) There are number of possible reasons for this, not the least of which is her rather isolated position as an affluent Jewish-American lesbian living among the financially struggling European men who constituted the vast majority of avant-garde writers. Furthermore, Stein's plays are often considered to be more literary than dramatic. Indeed, Stein is more often respected not for her own *oeuvre* but for her influence on other artists: avant-garde painters such as Picasso, Matisse, and Braque; young American writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald; and non-traditional American theatre figures and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including not only Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater and

Robert Wilson's Theatre of Silence-and-Images, but also Richard Schechner and his Performance Group.

Interestingly, Stein is most often thought to have been influenced by, and to have been a part of, the painting avant-garde more than the dramatic one. While it is true that the programmatic and frequently disruptive Stein text is not unlike the strategy of a collage, for example—in which the symbolic decoding is left to the respective observer—the technique of disruption-through-fragmentation was not limited to the visual art of dada, but could be found in their performances as well. Moreover, the disruption of audience expectations was an essential component of avant-garde theatre beginning with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), and simultaneity was pioneered by the futurists. It is no coincidence that Stein's plays reflect techniques and attitudes common among both the dadaists and the surrealists, since many were her close friends and associates.

To be fair, a few critics have acknowledged the connection between Stein and the drama of Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* (1917), and Tristan Tzara's *The Gas Heart* (1920). These critics have perceived that, like her contemporaries, Stein advocated anti-naturalism in the performing arts: no plot; directionless happenings; no characters; non-referential, and therefore self-contained, movement; no logic in the sequence of events; no transitions; no connections; no sense of progress. But they have also gone on to claim that, unlike the surrealists, she had no interest in the unconscious. Yet, given Stein's study of psychology at Radcliffe and Johns Hopkins Medical School, it seems unlikely that she would have had absolutely no interest in the unconscious, especially since surrealism sought to unify the unconscious and conscious minds. In addition, both Stein and André Breton, the founder of the surrealist movement, experimented with automatic writing. As a psychology student, Stein used herself and others as subjects for experiments in automatic writing.

Stein claimed to have used automatic writing in her early work, and critics have cited evidence of it throughout her career. As late as 1936, only two years before *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* was published, Stein gave a lecture, "What Are Master-Pieces and why are there so few of them," in which she described automatic writing (or "secondary writing," as she refers to it):

If you do not remember while you are writing, it may seem confused to others but actually it is clear and eventually that clarity will be clear, that is what a master-piece is, but if you remember while you are writing it will seem clear at the time to any one but the clarity will go out of it that is what a master-piece is not. (150)

Breton, for his part, considered it the aim of surrealism to promote automatic writing to “the exclusion of all other” arts. In his essay “The Automatic Message” (1933), he wrote:

If the surrealist effort has tended above all to restore inspiration to favor, and if, in order to do so, we have extolled automatic forms of expression to the exclusion of all others, and if in addition psychoanalysis, beyond every expectation, has charged with penetrable meaning the kinds of improvisation previously too easily held to be gratuitous and has conferred upon them, outside all aesthetic considerations, every significant value as human documents, it is nevertheless necessary to admit that sufficient light is far from having been cast on the conditions in which an “automatic” text or drawing must be obtained in order to be fully valid. (100)

Certainly passages in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* reflect the kind of stream of consciousness that Breton called “automatic writing.” In his opening monologue, for example, Doctor Faustus “automatically” tells the story of Faust up to the turning point of almost every other Faust version. Whereas the turning point of Goethe’s and Marlowe’s Faustian dramas is Faust’s decision to sell his soul to the devil, Stein begins her play *after* Faustus has made his decision:

What do I care there is no here nor there. What am I. I am Doctor Faustus who knows everything can do everything and you say it was through you but not at all, if I had not been in a hurry and if I had taken my time I would have known how to make white electric light and day-light and night light and what did I do I saw you miserable devil I saw you and I was deceived and I believed miserable devil I thought I needed you, and I thought I was tempted by the devil and I know no temptation is tempting unless the devil tells you so. (89)

Considering the absence of syntax in the above speech and the free association implied by such shifts as “can do everything and you say it was through you,” as well as by “and night light and what did I do I saw you miserable devil,” one can deduce that Stein wrote this either without consciously “thinking out” the speech of her character, or else by consciously attempting to have Faustus speak as if he were not thinking in a logical and orderly manner. Doctor Faustus speaks in such cycles throughout the play, repeating phrases or words and frequently rhyming.

Critics have interpreted this style of speech in a variety of psychological ways: Jungian and autobiographical, to name only two. What these interpretations ignore, however, are the blatant similarities between Stein’s



response to twentieth-century experience and the responses of the dadaists and surrealists. Rather than being merely an extension of her psyche, Stein's Faust exhibits the same frustrations, desires, and creative impulses as her fellow avant-garde artists in Europe. To wit, Doctor Faustus had been enchanted enough with electric light to agree to sell his soul for it, yet when he first appears in Stein's text, he has nothing but contempt for the light he has created:

I keep on having so much light that light is not bright and what after all is the use of light, you can see just as well without it, you can go around just as well without it, you can get up and go to bed just as well without it, and I I wanted to make it and the devil take it yes devil you do not even want it and I sold my soul to make it. (90)

This sentiment is remarkably similar to that of the dada artists, who, while they rejected what they saw as the banality of naturalism and the anthropomorphic arrogance of romanticism, also came in time to distrust the very modernism from which they had emerged. Like the dadaists, Faustus exhibits an early fascination with the technology of the modern world, but he eventually rejects the light he has created. Written several years after the demise of dada and on the eve of Hitler's invasion of France, Stein's *Doctor Faustus* incorporates not only the surrealists' interest in the unconscious, then, but also both the dadaists' fascination with technology—particularly the technological art of cinema—and their distrust of technology clearly warranted by the horrors of mechanized warfare already exhibited during World War I.

Stein even uses formal techniques similar to those employed by the dadaists. In her lecture "Composition as Explanation" (1925), for example, she describes the "continuous present" as "a beginning again and again and again, it was a list it was a similarity and everything different it was a similarity and everything different it was a distribution and an equilibration" (29). Often referred to as repetition, this "continuous present" might also be understood as a form of simultaneity, originally a performance technique borrowed from the Italian futurists by dada. Francis Picabia's dadaist play, *Relâche* (*No Performance* or *Relax*, 1924), for instance, began on stage with a film prologue by the young René Clair and music by Erik Satie. After one minute, hundreds of lights in photographic metallic reflectors blinded the audience. These formed the backdrop. On the stage, dozens of disconnected activities were then enacted. A fireman for the theatre smoked cigarettes and poured water from one pail to another. Man Ray, the American artist, sat on the side of the stage, occasionally marking off space with his shoes. Figures from Lucas Cranach's painting *Adam and Eve* (1528) appeared. Tuxedoed

playboys disrobed. And an automobile brought on a young couple in evening clothes.

While *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* does not contain such simultaneous, layered activity, the lack of progression in the plot does create a kind of “continuous present.” There is no cause and effect, no evolving plot line. Rather, the events that occur in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* embody the simultaneous present that one can associate with twentieth-century life. It has been, in a way, the mission of the twentieth century (and beyond) to destroy progressive history and create a single time in which everything in the past and possibly the future would be simultaneous. As Gertrude Stein herself writes in her 1934 lecture “Plays,” “The business of Art as I have tried to explain in ‘Composition as Explanation’ is to live in the actual present, that is the complete and actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present.” By opening her play after Faust’s fatal decision has been made, Stein creates that “complete actual” or continuous present, for she has effectively robbed the drama of its potential suspense. Without it, the tempo of the play is flattened, for suspense by its very nature is dependent on time. Anything but taut with anticipation, the audience has most of its questions answered from the opening moment. There is no question as to whether Faustus will or will not sell his soul, or as to whether he made the right decision; from the start, Doctor Faustus both acknowledges his decision to sell his soul—indeed, the fact that he has already sold it—and admits his dissatisfaction with that decision. By so diffusing the suspense *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, Stein disrupts not only her drama’s time-line, but also its causal progression.

Similarly, Stein uses rapid shifts of location to create a sense that various activities are taking place in simultaneous time, even if they do not actually do so. This “editing” or “montage” is quite possibly a technique Stein borrowed from the cinema, for we know she believed that film had fundamentally changed people’s ways of viewing and hearing. In “Plays” (1924) she writes,

I suppose one might have gotten to know a good deal about these things from cinema and how it changed from sight to sound, and how much before there was real sound how much of the sight was sound or how much it was not. In other words the cinema undoubtedly had a new way of understanding sight and sound in relation to emotion and time. (64)

Like Stein, the dadaists and surrealists considered film a major artistic innovation. And film provides an essential link between the European avant-garde and American art of all forms in the twentieth century. While dada was growing up in America, that is, so were moving pictures, and like dada they

were primarily an American phenomenon rather than a British one. The use of collage and montage, the representation of unconscious desire—all to be found in dada and surrealism—find their roots in cinematic technique.

Indeed, in the dream and in film one sees the image of something that is not really there, in an illusion similar to that of a mirror. In his avant-garde play *Him* (1927), another American writer, E. E. Cummings—whose poetic experiments with language in poetry were related to Stein's in prose—explicitly plays with the illusion of the mirror and its reflection of unconscious dreams and desires. Cummings' two main characters, Him and Me, take their names from their images in a mirror. In addition to exploring the role of characters-as-mirrors, Cummings creates the structure of his play as the literal mirror of a play:

HIM. This play of mine is all about mirrors.

ME. But who's the hero?

HIM. (*To her*) The hero of this play of mine? (*Hesitates*) A man . . .

ME. Naturally. What sort of man?

HIM. The sort of man—who is writing a play about a man who is writing a sort of play.

ME. That's a queer hero, isn't it?

HIM. Isn't it?

ME. And what is this hero called?

HIM. (*Very slowly*) This hero is called "Mr. O.Him, the Man in the Mirror."

ME. O.Him. (*Smiles*) And the heroine? (*Quickly*) Or isn't there any?

HIM. On the contrary. My heroine lives over there—. (*Points to the Mirror*)

ME. (*Turning at the invisible window*) Me?

HIM. Me, the beautiful mistress of the extraordinary Mr. O.Him.

ME. —Extraordinary because he thinks she's beautiful?

HIM. Extraordinary because I need a shave because he needs a shave.  
(29-30)

Aside from its formal similarities to the European avant-garde and that avant-garde's much smaller dramatic offshoot in the United States, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is important, as I noted earlier, for its explicit violations of the three fundamental elements of conventional or traditional drama: in brief, psychology, causality, and morality or providentially. Rather than merely mimic the techniques of the dadaists or surrealists, Stein disrupts this triad even further than either Cummings in *Him* or Wilder in his allegedly avant-garde play *Our Town* (1938), thereby establishing herself as the foremost dramatist of the American avant-garde.

It is noteworthy that *Our Town*, published in the same year as *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, deals with the same issues as Stein's play—namely, the individual's place in the world, humanity's relationship to a higher power, and the longing, if not for a better world, then for a greater appreciation of the world-in-itself, in all its mundane dailiness. Considering that both Stein and Wilder were writing in Europe (she in Paris and he in Switzerland) on the eve of World War II, it is not surprising that each was preoccupied with the question of where the world was headed. Yet, though the two were friends and corresponded during this time, their dramatic results could hardly be more different. Whereas Wilder, amid the trappings of the avant-garde (as I have described that avant-garde), clearly advocates in his play a retreat from modernist technology and a return to simple living in the small towns of late nineteenth-to-early-twentieth-century America, Stein seems to believe that there can be no retreat and that the consequences of this technology must be faced in the present as well as in the future.

To repeat, *Doctor Faustus* begins his journey not before or even *with* the decision to sell his soul, but after its sale. And, like Faust, the dadaists themselves emerged into a world that had already lost its secure faith in absolutes. Confronted with mechanical processes and biological determinism, the individual saw less and less scope for self-determined action. So too did Gertrude Stein emerge into such a world, and so too was she confronted, with the result that a patriarchal God had to disappear from her drama—to be replaced by a humanity in conflict with itself and with an industrial-technological environment of humankind's own creation.

The Faust legend itself stems from another kind of creation, for it is something of a retelling of the Biblical myth of the Garden of Eden as it appears in Genesis 2-3. There Eve is tempted by the devil, in the form of a serpent, to taste fruit from the tree of knowledge and to share that fruit with Adam—an action that banishes all humanity from paradise. Similarly, the Faust of legend is tempted to sell his soul to the devil (and, consequently, his right to a place in the paradise of heaven—the only Eden humankind can ever know) in exchange for omniscience, even omnipotence. Throughout Stein's play, major characters themselves usurp or reject power typically associated with God. Faustus claims the power to create light, as does Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel, although she seems less interested in this power than Faust. (This female character's dual names and fluctuating identity mark her as a kind of conflated womankind, which complicates the use of verb tenses throughout the play. Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel's names themselves derive from various recountings or dramatizations of the Faust legend by Christopher Marlowe [1588], Karl von Holtei; [1829], George Sand [1869], Ida Hahn-Hahn [1840], and Stephen Vincent Benét [1937]). Instead, Marguerite

Ida-Helena Annabel rejects all deities, turning her back on both the sun (which could be interpreted as a natural god) and the electric light (the new technological god).

Like the Biblical Eve, Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel is bitten by a viper. Initially, however, Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel appears to triumph over the bite. Faustus cures her, despite his repeated assertions that he cannot see her, and thereafter Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel becomes immune to the viper's poison. As Stein's Chorus intones, "See the viper there, / Cannot hurt her" (106). At first glance, this seems to be a triumph of science over God, but Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel rejects not only the natural light of the sun but also the science of Faust. And for the first time in the play she gains a unity of identity: "With her back to the sun / One sun / And she is one / Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel as well" (107).

With both unity and duality thus present in her main female character, Stein focuses attention on the multiple identities of women. Like the dadaists, who expressed skepticism about the unity of character in any dramatic or theatrical presentation, Stein creates a character who in name alone evokes both the good and evil depictions of women in history and literature. Half of the four-part name, Marguerite Ida, contains positive connotations of motherhood—Margaret the faithful wife and mother of multiple Faust legends, and Ida the mother of the gods—while the second half, Helena Annabel, suggests images of sexual temptation and demonic, anti-familial sentiment, aside from its possible (ironic?) reference to the mother of the Virgin Mary. (Annabel suggests the name Hannah, which in Hebrew refers to the Anna Perenna of Roman mythology and also to the mother of the Virgin Mary.) In creating such a fractured, complex identity for this figure, Stein, in my view, is contradicting one-dimensional representations of women and illuminating the absurdity of the longstanding Madonna-Whore dichotomy. A reader or viewer must constantly reconcile the manifold nature of Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel with the singular pronoun "she." The stubbornness of Stein's technique, moreover, is evident in criticism of the play, where scholars almost always shorten the character's name to "Marguerite Ida" or her initials, MIHA, rather than confuse their own readers' sense of grammar and logic.

The duality of Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel's character is visible not only in her name, but also in the events that surround her. She is at once an agent of action and the passive victim or recipient of others' actions. As an embodiment of Eve, she survives the bite of the snake, to become as powerful as Doctor Faustus in her ability to create light—candlelight in this case. Nevertheless, she still succumbs to "the man from the sea" (107), who appears as another embodiment of the same viper she had earlier eluded and

seduces her, exclaiming that “I am the only he and you are the only she and we are the only we” (108). His language, of course, recalls Adam and Eve, the first he and she. But through Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel, Stein inverts the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

For this Eve is not only not responsible for her own temptation (she is unwittingly bitten by the serpent and even fails to realize it was a serpent that was responsible for the bite), she is also relieved of the responsibility for the fall of humanity. It is the Adam figure, in fact (“the only he”), who is linked to both the devil *and* the serpent: “And indeed behind the man of the seas is Mephistopheles . . .” (108). This Adam is born from the sea, an image often equated with female sexuality, whereas the Eve of the Bible is born from Adam’s rib. When the man from the seas arrives with Mephistopheles, moreover, two children repeatedly call this seemingly maternal man “Mr. Viper.” Indeed, the only figure from Genesis who does not appear here is God himself.

Despite the inversion of the Eve character and the absence of a Judeo-Christian God from *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, humanity nonetheless suffers a spiritual fate equivalent to Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden. Even as Stein subverts or dismisses traditional theology, humans in the play seem to impose a similar fate on themselves as they choose to reject God and face their difficult lives alone. This rejection of God by humanity culminates in Faust’s damnation, not as the result of an act of God or seduction by a woman, but rather of his own free will. Considering her dismissal of traditional theology, it should not be surprising, then, that Stein opens the play after the central religious crisis—Faust’s decision to sell his soul to the devil for knowledge—which in other dramatizations of the Faust legend serves as the turning point. For Stein, like the dadaists and surrealists, the religious crisis—whether to believe in or turn away from a higher being, whether to accept or reject organized religion—is past history and no longer relevant to her “continuous present.”

Rather than concern himself with his relationship to, or the repercussions of the existence of, a godlike figure, Stein’s Doctor Faustus begins the play by lamenting his own foolishness at allowing someone else (the devil) to wield influence over him. Like the egotism of previous Fausts, his own egotism is central to his character, as when this Faustus vents his frustration on Mephistopheles. While Faust immediately regrets his decision to sell his soul for electric light, his regret—or, better, his remorse—is motivated not by fear of an almighty creator or a crisis of conscience, but rather by his immediate *physical* discomfort—caused by the relentless glare of the lights. “I keep on having so much light that light is not bright” (89), he complains. As I have implied, the spiritual wrath of God is thus systematically replaced by



the secular wrath of technology, as represented by electric light, in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*.

That God is replaced by the modern technology of electricity may be Stein's punning reference to Goethe's criticism of the Enlightenment in his *Faust*. Despite its centrality to the theme, however, the "spirituality" of the electric lights has so far been ignored in criticism of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. In recent scholarship about the play, in fact, Faust is frequently compared to so secular a figure as Thomas Edison. What this interpretation ignores, though, is the tremendous theological or ontological weight placed on the electric lights in the absence of a god figure in the drama. Faust is not an inventor grown tired of his invention. Rather, he has ceased to be able to control it; he cannot escape the very lights he has created and they torment him. Furthermore, these electric lights communicate with Faustus, an issue not addressed by the Edison analogy. Early in the play, for example, Faust sings a duet with his dog—and the lights—about the electric lights:

Bathe me

says Doctor Faustus

Bathe me

In the electric lights

During this time the electric lights come and go

What is it

says Doctor Faustus

Thank you

says the dog.

Just this moment the electric lights get  
brighter and nothing comes

Was it it

says Doctor Faustus

Faustus meditates he does not see the dog.

Will it

Will it

Will it be

Will it be it.

Faustus sighs and repeats

Will it be it.

A duet between the dog and Faustus

Will it be it.

Just it.

At that moment the electric light gets pale again and in that  
moment Faustus shocked says

It is it . . . (92)



The above “duet” between Faust, the dog, and the lights clearly indicates a superior role for the lights, as well as their ability to convey information to Faustus. Indeed, just before his repetitious questioning of the lights, Faust meditates so deeply that he seems to forget the dog, with whom he has sung the duet until now. This meditation then culminates in an unnamed or undecipherable revelation by the lights: “It is it . . .” Certainly, this relationship is more complicated than that between an inventor and his object, and, although Faustus does usurp a godlike power in creating the light, it is the light that ultimately controls him.

Further articulated through this relationship between Doctor Faustus and the lights is the play’s singular moral design. For Faust may have been able to create electric light, but he cannot control it; he has produced a never-ending day, but no corresponding night. Stein has thus returned, via Faust’s creation, to a godless and disordered world by undoing, as it were, God’s first act of creation. As the first book of Genesis reads,

And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and morning, one day. (Genesis 1.3-5)

God’s first act is to separate light from darkness, thereby creating day and night, evening and morning. But Faust’s creation of the electric light does away with this distinction, and Stein equates this merging of day and night, light and dark, with the disappearance of moral order from the universe. And it is after Doctor Faustus has acknowledged that he foolishly traded his soul for the lights that he articulates the new “moral order” of the play:

Who cares if you lie if you steal, there is no snake to grind under one’s heel, there is no hope there is no death there is no life there is no breath, there just is every day all day and when there is no day there is no clay. (90)

The cycle of day into night has been broken and with it the moral certainty of the separation of light from dark, good from evil. When Faustus rhetorically asks, “Who cares if you lie if you steal,” it is clear that God might have cared, but He is now absent. And in the absence of God, the natural world suffers, as do all living beings who are dependent upon it. Not only is Faust tormented by the unrelenting lights, for example, but so is his dog:

I am a dog and I bay at the moon, I did yes I used to do it I used to bay at the moon I always used to do it and now now not any more, I cannot, of course I cannot, the electric lights they make it be that

there is no night and if there is no night then there is no moon and if there is no moon I do not see it and if I do not see it I cannot bay at all. (111)

From the human as opposed to the canine angle, Faust's boy companion notes that, without a moon, "no one is crazy any more" (111). Given the events of the play, however, the boy's observation begs the question, what is "crazy" in the context of this play? Given the talking dog who says "thank you," multiple identities, a day without end, a devil who appears to have little direct power over humanity, and a universe without moral order, it seems that the lack of a moon has actually made the world crazier. Of course what Stein implies, through her dismantling of a theological framework for the play's action, is that the craziness of humanity is the result neither of a natural aberration nor of the absence of God. Humanity is *innately* prone to maddening self-destructiveness, and the lifting of moral sanctions merely reveals the true nature of the beings underneath.

Stein posits the inability of humanity to advance or improve itself in her 1936 essay "What Are Master-Pieces and why are there so few of them." In a piece that seems to be a gloss on *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, she questions *anyone's* ability to create art—to create timeless *masterpieces*—in a world where human development seems less to support Charles Darwin's theory of evolution than to be trapped in its own vicious cycle or re-revolution:

What is the use of being a boy if you are going to grow up to be a man. And what is the use there is no use from the standpoint of master-pieces there is no use. Anybody can really know that.

There is really no use in being a boy if you are going to grow up to be a man and boy you can be certain that that is continuing and a master-piece does not continue it is as it is but it does not continue. It is very interesting that no one is content with being a man and boy but he must also be a son and a father and the fact that they all die has something to do with time but it has nothing to do with a master-piece. (153)

The above text finds its way into *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, in Faust's musing about himself and his role in the universe: "I go where I go, where is there there is where and all the day and all the night too it grew and grew and there is no way to say I and a dog and a boy, if a boy is to grow to be a man am I a boy am I a dog is a dog a boy is a boy a dog and what am I I cannot cry what am I oh what am I" (98). This might be construed as a dream sequence—"Doctor Faustus the dog and the boy all sleeping" (98)—for Faustus repeatedly sees himself here as interchangeable with the dog and the

boy and consequently lacking a definite identity of his own:

Man and dog dog and man each one can tell it all like a ball with a  
caress no tenderness, man and dog just the same each one can take the  
blame each one can well as well tell it all as—they can, man and dog,  
well well man and dog what is the difference between a man and a dog  
when I say none. (98)

Towards the end of the play, Faust even responds to his dog with the very same line that has been repeated by the animal itself throughout the play: “Yes thank you” (111).

Stein may create multiple identities for Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel, but Faust’s ongoing questioning of himself does not result in even a temporary unity or oneness of identity. Doctor Faustus thus appears to be incapable of spiritual fulfillment through God or even the devil, who is unable to convince Faustus that he has, or had, a soul. Faust’s self-querying actually begins with this question posed to the devil: “I have made it but have I a soul to pay for it” (90). Moreover, his question “what am I” (89), made to appear a declaration, is repeated frequently throughout the play—yet Faustus does not find an answer. In fact, after his final action, the killing of the boy and the dog so as to gain entrance into hell, Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel’s failure to recognize him denies Faust his identity. Before falling helplessly into the arms of the man from the seas, Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel says, “you are not Doctor Faustus no not ever never never” (118). Faust’s quest to understand himself may be as unrelenting as the glare of the electric lights, but it is also just as unfulfilling. As the circularity of Faust’s musings suggests, the attempt to know oneself—in the hope of bettering, renewing, or redeeming oneself—is essentially futile.

If the fundamental subject matter of almost all serious plays of the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries is the attempt to resurrect fundamental ethical and philosophical certainties *without* resurrecting the fundamental spiritual certainty of a judgmental or mindful God, then not only has Gertrude Stein replaced the spiritual certainty of God with the secular amorality of modern technology, she has also replaced the psycho-scientific certainty of integrated yet developing personality with the inability of humanity either to comprehend itself or to evolve. In this play, all the characters are reduced to the same frustrating inability not only to understand themselves, but also to understand the world and to act upon it. Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel cannot defend herself against the man from the seas; the devil cannot control Doctor Faustus (not even long enough to convince him that he once had a soul); Faust cannot regulate the lights once he has created them, and at the end of the play he fails to convince Marguerite Ida-

Helena Annabel to accompany him to hell; and both the boy and the dog have no power over their own lives, manipulated as they are by Faust—and ultimately killed by him.

Like Wilder's *Our Town*, again, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* investigates the triumph of modern technology and the role of God in contemporary life. But rather than offer romantic nostalgia and spiritual redemption to a Depression-weary and war-wary American public, through isolation—and isolationism—in a quaint New Hampshire town of the turn of the twentieth century, Stein accepts the impotence of humanity without a god, without morals, and without a real sense of itself. Indeed, in an almost Absurdist fashion, Stein's characters revel in their own frustration and ignorance. As a final gesture to this frustration, Stein ends the play with a little boy and little girl futilely calling for the man from the sea, or Mr. Viper as they address him: "Please Mr. Viper listen to me he is he and she is she and we are we please Mr. Viper listen to me" (118).

The end for Doctor Faustus is a similarly fruitless gesture. Faust's frustration with the world culminates in his desire to "go to hell," which neatly returns the play to its theological question—does Doctor Faustus have a soul? Ironically, Mephistopheles informs Faustus that he cannot enter hell without a soul, which Faust has sold. In order to enter hell, Doctor Faustus is therefore told, he must commit a sin. When he asks, "What sin, how can I without a soul commit a sin," Mephisto peremptorily replies, "Kill anything" (116). Faust then kills his companions, the boy and the dog, and descends into hell.

In light of Faust's damnation, we may usefully consider the doctrinal distinction between venial sin and mortal sin as articulated by the Catholic Church. Damnation occurs where the sin is mortal, not venial. For sin to be mortal the act must be of grave matter and involve a deliberate turning away from God. This, say the catechisms, asks for as full a knowledge of the consequences as the sinner is able to embrace. Such a distinction may explain why Doctor Faustus can turn away from God initially (through the pact he makes with Mephisto before Stein's play begins) with no obvious consequences, but turn from God at the conclusion of the play, through murder, and enter hell. Significantly, the word "sin" is used only in this final scene. Faust's initial turning away from God is motivated by his desire for knowledge, not by any desire to repudiate or "kill" the deity. For this reason we may regard his first sin as venial. At the end of the play, however, Faustus consciously turns from God by committing the mortal sin of murder—i.e., by killing a human being made in God's image.

I believe that Stein uses the majority of the play as a build, undramatic as it may seem, to this final moment. Faust desires to go to hell to escape the reality that he himself has created through his rejection of God in favor

of technology. But, for Stein in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, the term “hell” describes this very technological reality (or nightmare): “Any light is just a light and now there is nothing more either by day or by night just a light” (91). The unrelenting light can be read as a modern analogue to the eternal fires of hell. This technological light has the capacity, with its heat and radiance (neither warm and nourishing like the sun, nor gently haloed like candlelight), to overwhelm all other forms of light and, like the hell of theology, every type of faith.

Living in Europe during the 1930s, Stein thus reflects the anxiety of a continent only recently recovered from the first mechanized world war, yet now poised on the brink of a second one—a war whose technological devastation and human waste would beggar the imagination. Unlike the retrogressive Emily in *Our Town*, Stein could not advocate that humans simply and happily “realize life while they live it—every, every minute” (100). Rather she suggests, like other avant-garde writers of her time, that life cannot be totally realized or understood, and she avers, unlike the comforting Stage Manager in Wilder’s *Our Town*, that no God exists to create moral order or to prevent humankind from technological self-extinction.

The question remains, did Gertrude Stein herself reject faith in God, or is she warning others against the abandonment of such faith? Clearly, Stein demonstrated during her life a fascination with religion, Catholicism in particular. Though Stein herself was Jewish, Catholicism seems always to have held a fascination for her. Yet in her early writings, such as the “Radcliffe Themes” (written 1894-95), *The Making of Americans* (written 1903-11) and *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* (written 1903), Stein challenged institutional or organized religion with its patriarchal and hierarchical structure. Her objections to such religion thus tempered her enthusiasm for the Catholic Church. While Stein’s religious ideas owe much to Catholicism, then, even her earliest writings are openly critical of some Catholic beliefs and practices.

In their place, Stein advocated an individualized, woman-identified religion in which first-hand spiritual experience becomes the individual’s goal. If one compares her characterization of Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel as a self-contained, candlelit entity to her essentialization of the electrically lit Faust in the amorphous “what am I,” Stein clearly argues for a feminine version of spirituality. And yet, Marguerite Ida-Helena Annabel falls helplessly into the arms of Mr. Viper at the conclusion of the play, a final action that indicates nihilistic hopelessness for humanity rather than religious salvation. Like the dadaists, to name only one avant-garde group, Stein lost faith in the traditional patriarchal God, but she also lost faith both in unconventional feminine spirituality and, paradoxically, in the human potential of any individual

*without* absolute faith. Faust's "individual quest," after all, ends in murder, despair, and chaos. And the grim attitude that permeates *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* continues after World War II, in the works of such writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco, who saw humankind's trust in a higher power betrayed by the human folly—the hellfire of the Holocaust and atomic obliteration—of the last great war.

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## “Marlowe’s and Brecht’s *Edward II*: Drama into Film”

The reign of the English king Edward the Second (1307-27) has long been a subject of study, discussion, and debate for scholars and artists alike. Indeed, there is much in what has become the *legend* of this sovereign to draw one’s attention. Arguably one of the first clear historical cases of a regularly troubled regime, the reign of Edward has become an ideal subject for the exploration of the nature of power by historians and sociologists, as well as by novelists, poets, and dramatists. Their studies, however, have been regularly subject to complications and distractions due to the many potentially prurient aspects of this reign: multiple murders, a grossly unhappy marriage, revolutions, rebellions, and, especially, Edward’s engagement in homosexual activity. While the importance of Edward’s sexuality is obvious as a means to explore the nature and treatment of sexuality in early English history, it has almost invariably distracted from or colored discussions of the more central, political issues of his rule.

The most significant artistic examination of Edward’s reign has been subject to similarly skewed treatment. So resonant is Christopher Marlowe’s play *Edward II* (1592) that it has become a veritable locus for cultural discourse on sexuality. Both in studies of the text and in performance of the play, the emphasis has been on questions of Edward’s sexuality, whether through direct address of the subject or a conscious moral choice to avoid it. This is not surprising given that, historically, the drama is a form well suited to reinterpretation inspired by the whims of changing times and changing fashions. Accordingly, the treatment of *Edward II* throughout its critical and stage histories has almost always been based on prevailing opinions about sex and the dominant view of homosexuality. In fact, ever since the issue of sexuality became truly controversial in the fifteenth century, Edward in general, and Marlowe’s play in particular (as well as Bertolt Brecht’s adaptation of it, titled *The Life of Edward the Second of England* [1924]), have been subjected to a legacy of misrepresentation.

While it would be impossible, even absurd, to completely avoid the issue of sexuality in any consideration of Edward, a character for whom desire (sexual and otherwise) is an important character trait, most stagings of, and writings about, *Edward II* make two fundamental errors in their address of his sexual practices. First, the critical and performance histories of the play focus almost solely, even obsessively, on Edward’s sexual practices in spite of Marlowe’s conscious attempt in his text to suppress discussions or enactments of the King’s sexuality. Second, the essays and books and productions have approached the subject of Edward’s sexuality in a virtual historical vacuum,



yoking the text to a contemporary conception of sexuality that is factually inaccurate and, perhaps more importantly, dramaturgically illegitimate.

Both historically and in Marlowe's original dramatic text, discussion of homosexual relationships as defined in the modern era is non-existent. Indeed, part of the play's power derives from the fact that the sexuality in it is an accepted condition of human life. And in today's modern political landscape, this simple fact has the potential to be an extremely powerful statement of both individual sexual emancipation and overall sexual harmony, at the same time as it avoids the assumptions and prejudices that characterize modern sexual politics. It should be clear, then, from both the historical and dramaturgical perspectives on *Edward II*—the evolving view of homosexuality, the evolving view of Edward II as a historical figure, the manner in which his reign and his sexuality have been treated by successive dramatists and directors—that the issue of sexuality in the play is best addressed in relation to its *political* aspects and ramifications, rather than its moral ones. The 1991 film adaptation of Marlowe's play by the British filmmaker Derek Jarman (1942-94) does exactly this—not by accident, avoiding in the process many of the distortions that have characterized previous adaptations or productions of *Edward II*.

Jarman's film adaptation followed a schema that cosmetically appeared similar to that of Gerard Murphy's 1991 production of the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company, which called attention to the King's homosexuality through every available means. This is probably unsurprising in that the late Jarman, in his career as an artist, writer, designer, and filmmaker, had been driven by his active assertion of his own sexuality as the most important, if not sole, defining characteristic of his personality. All the films he made are concerned in some manner with homosexuality and the often marginalized role of the homosexual in a predominantly heterosexual society. Often, they reinvestigate historical personages in light of their homosexuality, as is the case for *Sebastiane* (1976), *Caravaggio* (1986), and *Wittgenstein* (1992), each of which contains a powerfully explicit depiction of homoerotic passion.

Obviously, *Edward II* itself shares this defining characteristic of Jarman's work. Given this fact, along with his reputation as an uncompromising and highly controversial filmmaker, it would be safe to assume that Jarman's *Edward II* would be, like Murphy's theatrical production, a largely unjustifiable perversion of the play for the sake of the artist's own radical socio-political stance. Indeed, the director's own public comments accompanying the release of his film indicated he felt (adopting an essentialist perspective of homosexuality) that the narrative of Marlowe's Elizabethan play encapsulated the history of the homosexual experience—one plagued with misunderstanding, ignorance, denial, and suppression. Jarman even seemed to claim that he had seriously distorted a canonical text in the service

of a pro-gay agenda, and that he wanted to take revenge on the straight community for their oppression of homosexuals.

A more thorough investigation of the film of *Edward II*, however, reveals that he fashioned a film more in the spirit of Marlowe, and to some degree of Brecht, than his own claims would lead one to believe. From Marlowe's original, Jarman took the notion of morality—or sexuality—as a non-issue and placed his primary focus on the politics of power, recognizing (unlike his “queer” predecessors) the necessity and desirability of examining a political struggle by largely adhering to the structure and content of a text that itself is primarily concerned with the politics of power. From Brecht's adaptation of Marlowe, he took the massive streamlining of characters and narrative, a greater explicitness in the expression of homosexual feelings, the complete absence of a *divine* ruling power, and not a little of Brecht's apparent misogyny. This isn't to say, of course, that Jarman has not radically reconceived Marlowe's play on his own terms for the cinema; rather, that Jarman's film may be understood as a variation on a musical theme—emphasizing some portions of the dramatic source to the purposeful neglect of others.

Aside from content, there are two primary aspects of the *Edward II*—one structural, the other cinematographic—that nonetheless testify to Jarman's adherence to Marlowe's model. First, the whole of the film is constructed as a flashback, opening with Edward and his jailer-cum-executioner, Lightborn, in the dungeon that serves as the King's prison. Surprisingly, this device is not used to wholly reconstitute the film's narrative from the subjective perspective of Edward's vision, which would have allowed Jarman free reign to exaggerate the monstrosities of the sovereign's heterosexual oppressors. Indeed, at least until the last quarter of the film, Edward is rarely portrayed any more sympathetically than are Mortimer and Isabella. Second, the film of *Edward II* is far less of a cinematographic departure from the play than it might have been. All of the settings in the film are spare interiors, for example; the lighting itself is evocative of the theater in its lack of natural sources and self-conscious deployment; and the camera, for its part, is stationary throughout, framing the human figures in the center of each shot. The result is that the film “plays” as if it were filmed theater.

“Playing” within the boundaries of Marlowe's dramaturgy, moreover, Jarman is determined to expel contemporary assumptions about sexuality and morality from the piece. Unlike Gerard Murphy, he refuses to present the relationship of Edward and Gaveston as superior to other relationships in the film. As in Marlowe, their relationship is in no way made remarkable other than in its effects on the political order of the nation. Basically, it remains undeveloped and has little depth. As Gaveston reads the letter from Edward requesting his return, for instance, he is surrounded by sexual and

emotional alternatives to the King. His reunion with his companion, then, seems motivated more by the pursuit of status and its luxuries than by a deep-rooted love for Edward. This motivation is only reinforced by Jarman's recasting of Spenser as a lover and constant companion of Gaveston. And it is further intensified by Jarman's use of a succession of hedonistic, sensual images to accompany Gaveston's voice-over reading of Edward's letter—visions of handsome young men serving as attendants-cum-entertainers to the couple. For these "group" images undercut the idea of the singular union of Edward and Gaveston in a central love relationship.

Subsequent scenes including the two rarely depict them alone, never mind in any situation that would give a depth to their relationship beyond an attraction based solely on sex and power. Even when Jarman depicts their potentially sorrowful and moving separation as a languorous, romantic slow-dance, he offers a distancing device to prevent the viewer from complete empathy or identification with the couple. The incorporation on the soundtrack of British pop star (and icon of androgyny) Annie Lennox warbling a badly dubbed torch-song version of Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" (1944) serves not only to infuse the scene with a gay camp aesthetic, but also to undermine its emotional resonance and possible sentimentality.

Again invoking Marlowe's model, Jarman has the two men who constitute the central couple demonstrate behavior that is clearly beyond the boundaries of traditional moral systems, be they historical or contemporary. Though clearly the most sympathetic member of his society, Edward is in no way configured as a moral exemplar or model figure. Even as Jarman often fashions Edward as an attractive figure, employing close-ups of the angelic or cherubic face of Steven Waddington (who portrays the King), he balances this portrait (as Marlowe himself did) with a startling number of instances of opprobrious behavior on the King's part. In a series of scenes involving Edward and his wife, Queen Isabella, for example, he behaves violently toward her. Since his difficulties with Isabella seem to stem from her own sexuality, over which she has no more control than he has over his, Edward is depicted here as capable of irrational and destructive action. Later, the depth of his loyalty to Gaveston is called into question both by his strangely rapid assent to his companion's banishment and by his proto-sexual alignment with Lightborn as well as Spenser. Finally, Jarman constructs a number of scenes in which Edward unleashes extreme and wanton cruelty on successive representatives of his enemies.

If Jarman's conception of Edward's amoral behavior is evocative of Marlowe's, his conception of the character of Gaveston exaggerates Marlowe's already unflattering portrait. Gaveston may be at once an unfairly punished,

misunderstood, but he is also the mindlessly combative rascal he is reported to be by Mortimer. While Jarman's depiction of Gaveston is increasingly sympathetic as the film progresses—especially after the relentless and merciless attacks on him—the initial rendering of his character is hardly as charitable. In a scene that perhaps best embodies this disagreeable image of the man, he and a group of thugs, despite Edward's protests, exact revenge upon the Bishop for his order to exile Gaveston. Whereas in Marlowe the Bishop is simply banished to the Tower of London, in Jarman's version the nameless thugs surround a bleeding, bruised Bishop, clad only in his underwear, as Gaveston proceeds to sexually abuse the cleric—treatment that seems in ill proportion to the original offense. In what may be an even more shocking scene, Gaveston corners Isabella in a hallway and, in an atmosphere laden with sexual energy, brings his face close to hers as if to kiss her. Isabella hesitates slightly, then moves to meet Gaveston's lips. But instead of responding in turn, he unleashes a loud, mocking laugh in the Queen's face. That Jarman would so magnify the eagerness of this man to humiliate others is indicative of his overwhelming desire to re-create the amoral—nay, immoral—world of Marlowe's own play.

The other two focal characters that populate Jarman's film are, of course, no more likely to adhere to traditional tenets of morality. As in Marlowe's play, these figures often demonstrate more despicable qualities than the worst ones given to Edward and Gaveston. Mortimer, who is transformed in the second half of Marlowe's *Edward II* into its chief villain, functions only as a secondary one in the film (for reasons that shall become clear in my discussion of the fourth focal figure). In the first sequence of scenes in which he appears, Mortimer appears completely ridiculous in his continual diatribes against Edward and Gaveston, who have not yet behaved in an aggressive or offensive manner. He seems rather like an irrational, almost hateful parent who assumes that his children are misbehaving without investing the time or energy to discover if they are really doing so. After Mortimer has been given reason to criticize the actions of Edward and Gaveston (in the form of their abuse of the Church, their endless hedonism, and their severely contemptuous treatment of all those around them), he is temporarily transformed into an intelligent, rational force seeking to restore order to the realm. This manifestation of his persona is fleeting as well, however, as he soon begins to be driven by sadistic impulses and the promise of personal gain. Whereas in Marlowe's version Mortimer wavers a bit before fully adopting the role of oppressor, in the film he is all too eager to undertake a campaign of wanton cruelty.

The depravity of action displayed by Mortimer pales, however, in comparison with that found in the most radical of Jarman's exaggerations or

distensions of Marlovian character: his conception of Isabella. This Isabella turns fast and furiously against her king and husband. In Marlowe, by contrast, the Queen is afforded a number of scenes of great sorrow at the King's spurning of her in favor of Gaveston, and more than once pleads with Mortimer not to take up arms against Edward. In Jarman, the Queen seems more than willing to take up such arms by herself. In the play of *Edward II*, Isabella requests that Mortimer leave her alone for fear that the King will believe Gaveston's intimations that the two are having an affair; in the film of *Edward II*, Isabella aggressively and lustfully seeks out Mortimer. Her actions in Jarman's version are all directed toward destroying Edward and elevating herself, and this behavior pattern quickly transforms her from wronged wife into ruthless demagogue. Along the way, she is presented as nearly inhuman—always clad in the most artificial or plastic of outfits, and adorned with the glitteringly empty glamour of jewels and an absolutely impenetrable mask of make-up, as well as with the cold sexuality of someone who is completely self-absorbed. The extreme manifestation of this characterization of Isabella-as-monster occurs in the scene where she kills Edward's brother Kent in the most painful and grotesque of manners, by ripping the flesh from his neck with her teeth. She has thus become the ultimate human vessel of animal brutality, in the process transporting herself, and the film, far beyond the limits of a Christian moral ethos.

If only Mortimer and Isabella were shown to operate on the fringes of traditional or conventional morality, the film of *Edward II* might well be perceived as a mutilation of Marlowe's dramatic text in an effort to promote the "queer" agenda. However, *none* of the figures who inhabit Jarman's world are particularly righteous. The idea that this filmmaker is pursuing a singular, biased, and heterophobic agenda on behalf of the minority homosexual population inside, as well as outside, *Edward II*—a view put forward at the time of the film's release by its conservative critics, and only slightly modified by its liberal champions—is therefore grossly misguided. The film's vision of *all* sexuality, all human relationships, is equally dark and deadly.

While it can be argued that Jarman's excision of Marlowe's ambiguity or taciturnity concerning the homosexual nature of the central relationship in *Edward II* positions the film as a combative heterophobic statement, all of this director-screenwriter's enlargements, reductions, and omissions are a means of establishing the content and character of a pairing—and a faction—that will develop into a *political* force. Hence, unlike earlier productions that invoked modern definitions of homosexuality (including, in addition to Gerard Murphy's 1991 production for the London's Royal Shakespeare Company, Joan Littlewood's 1956 production at the Theatre Royal in Stratford East; Toby Robertson's 1969 production at the Edinburgh Festival;

Ellis Rabb's 1975 production for The Acting Company in New York; and Nicholas Hytner's 1986 production for Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre Company), Jarman's *Edward II* incorporates such definitions without relying on stereotypical gay behavior or iconography. The result is that the sexuality of the King and his companions is never alien to the environment in which it is placed (nor to the environment of a contemporary audience?): the gay men in the film are not so significantly different in dress or demeanor as to place them on the outskirts of their society. Indeed, both heterosexuals and homosexuals are represented in equal portion and with equal measure by Jarman. And when he allows his heterosexual characters to sneer at his homosexual ones (as previous directors have done), the effect is immediately countered (as previous directors have not done) by an equivalent and opposite sneer on the part of the gay contingent.

With traditional moral order thus cast out of the film and the stage set for the development of the gay contingent as a cohesive force for action, Jarman mimics the absolutes of Marlowe's political order. Capitalizing on the similarities between the political struggle in the play and the political struggle of contemporary homosexuals, he chooses *not* to focus the conflict or debate in his film on the nature of power in relation to the state, and therefore banishes civic concerns completely. There are no indications whatsoever in Jarman's *Edward II* that anyone is concerned with the integrity of the nation or the welfare of its citizens; all references to international affairs or domestic unrest have been removed. Instead, Jarman fashions the political debate in his film according to the boundaries of sexual self-definition, or as defined by the struggle between biological determinism and existential individualism, casting homosexuality and heterosexuality as essentially political factions vying for control of the state. The dispute is over the integrity of sexual states rather than political states, and is thereby intended by Jarman to reflect the struggle waged daily by homosexuals in contemporary Western, if not world, society.

On the side of this allegorical determinism are Edward, Gaveston, and Spenser. The actions of these men in the film often serve to illustrate the position advocated by most politically active homosexuals today—namely, that sexuality is an integral and immutable part of their biological as well as psychological constitution. (Such a position in fact echoes Marlowe's own suggestion that it is Edward's biological birthright that ensures his regal authority.) To enforce this idea, all the gay men in Jarman's *Edward II* are coupled only with other gay men, and are always seen to reject the advances of heterosexual women. This idea established, Jarman then enforces the notion of the homosexual group as politically motivated and active, surrounding its members periodically with nameless gay activists who carry placards



with political slogans. In this way, the gay faction acts always to protect the boundaries of its own community, so as to insure the free expression of members' sexual birthright.

On the side of Jarman's allegorical individualism are Isabella, Mortimer, and the baronial council, all of whom seem to advocate the position that sexuality is a conscious individual choice. More overtly, however, their individualistic political position manifests itself in a desire for the highest degree of personal power, which is to say the freedom to act in whatever manner they see fit, in whatever situation. For this faction, Edward's sexual order represents the chief obstacle to their ascension to governmental rule and complete control. It is thus essential for Isabella, Mortimer, and the baronial council to depose Edward less as regent than as the leader of an order that is the chief adversary to their own order. And the assumption of power by the individualists can come only from their suppression of the other entrenched order, in this case the biological determinism of gay sexuality. Their motives for the elimination of the homosexual faction are never cast in moral terms (for both Mortimer and Isabella themselves are depicted as being fond of unconventional sexual practices), but always in political ones, as they fight to achieve absolute, unassailable authority. Hence Mortimer is always clad in military wear, the members of the baronial council look like Thatcherite members of Parliament in clothing and comportment, and Isabella herself both looks and acts like a demagogic head of state.

The form of the individualists' struggle for power itself evokes the form of the same struggle in Marlowe's play. That is, it manifests itself in increasingly intense corporeal violence, rather than in rational, ideological debate. In the film, as previously mentioned, Gaveston and a gang of thugs abuse the Bishop, while Isabella murders Kent by biting into his neck; priests spit on a defiled Gaveston; Mortimer furtively stabs Gaveston; policemen with shields and clubs beat down the defenseless gay activists; Edward and Spenser taunt and then kill a policeman strung up on a meat hook. Moreover—violence aside—as in the play, Edward's deterministic ideology increasingly appears to be superior to the individualistic one as the film progresses. As he begins to abandon the immature taunts and idle pleasures of his adversaries and starts focusing his attention on the protection of his individual rights against a usurping power, Isabella and Mortimer's attempts at a coup appear more and more illegitimate. The King is thus seen to protect pre-existing boundaries against the advances of those who seek to eliminate him, and his frequently being framed in close-up—especially when he is destitute in the dungeon—serves not only to emphasize the idea of “boundary” or delimited space, but also to increase our sympathy for, indeed identification with, him. In his contrasting treatment of Mortimer and Isabella, Jarman italicizes the depths of



their depravity, of their draconian cruelty, by choosing shots that incorporate their large, menacing shadows as well as their savage voice-overs.

Jarman's treatment of the conclusion to this political struggle is justifiable in its designation of Edward as the essential victor—personally, sexually, *and* politically. After he has filmed the conclusion of the drama as written, with Edward meeting a horrific death as a hot poker is thrust into his anus, Jarman offers an alternative sequence that renders the play's ending an irrational fantasy. Lightborn advances toward Edward with the poker, but suddenly stops and throws the implement into a pool of water. He then advances toward Edward and kisses him passionately. This kiss, the first display of sexual *affection* in the film of any length and ardor, becomes a triumph not just for the otherwise desperate, despairing Edward but for the whole of the “queer” political community as well. In addition, in the sequence that follows, Edward's son and now ostensibly the ruler of England, clad in women's make-up and earrings, pirouettes to Tchaikovsky's “Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy” atop a cage containing a wrecked, dissolute Mortimer and Isabella.

This sequence of scenes, although dramaturgically blasphemous at first glance, is actually within the realm of Marlowe's own configuration of the conclusion of Edward's reign and struggle. For in the final moments of the play, as of the film, the implication is that the homosexual contingent—heretofore no more able or willing to inspire peace and harmony than the heterosexual faction—has triumphed in spirit and will ultimately triumph in political reality. (In Marlowe's *Edward II*, Prince Edward, now Edward III and a monarch in his own right, decrees that Mortimer be hanged and dispatches Isabella, who is suspected of being an accomplice in the plot to kill her husband, to the Tower of London.)

Thus it should be clear that, in the apparent interest of purveying a modern gay sensibility and hegemony, Jarman in fact strayed less from his progenitor than much of the commentary and controversy surrounding the film would indicate. In constructing his admittedly heavily ideological version of *Edward II*, Jarman, like Brecht before him, succeeded through a skillful recognition of the correlatives between his own concerns and those of the play. Seizing on the similarities between the moral-social-political milieu of Marlowe's time and his own, as well as on the dramatist's banishment of traditional or conservative morality from his play, Jarman realized that he could employ this Elizabethan text to make a specific, contemporary statement about gay sexuality as well as a broad, universal one about common humanity, without at the same time undermining the essential worth of his literary source.

A film adaptation like Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, which on the surface seems to be too purposefully irreverent, too tied to the whims of its own age

to be a close and informed reading of the original play, is revealed, then, to be the very model of a fruitful approach to translating a text to the screen. Whatever the reason for his initial attraction to *Edward II*, the director clearly pursued a thoughtful and respectful (as opposed to blindly reverent, on the one hand, or groundlessly profane, on the other) examination of Marlowe's drama. Upon close scrutiny, the film shows every sign that Jarman executed a sound dramaturgical analysis of the play, as well as a solid historical analysis of the complex context from which it emerged. The result is a film that is at once both a conscientious adaptation of its source and an imaginative, challenging recasting of that source for our own day, and for another artistic medium. Indeed, Jarman's *Edward II* offers testament both to the resiliency of dramatic texts in general and to the uniquely stirring, thought-provoking power those texts may have in the hands of a particularly gifted, intelligent, and inspired film artist.

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## 11. PRODUCTION AND INTERPRETATION.

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Key Analytical Question: “To what extent can we say that it is best, or more profitable, to interpret a play from what we see on the stage, not the page; put another way, what can we learn from a play-in-production that we might not be able to learn from simply reading the same play?”

### “August Strindberg, Ingmar Bergman, and *The Ghost Sonata*”

I want to concentrate in this essay on the best and best known of Strindberg’s chamber plays, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), and I want to come at it through a theater production by Ingmar Bergman. Bergman directed *The Ghost Sonata* three times during his long career: in 1941, as a student, in Medborgarhuset (Sweden); in 1954, at the Malmö City Theater; and in 1973, at the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm. I will concentrate on Bergman’s third production of the play in this essay, since it represents the culmination of his thinking on what he once called “the most remarkable drama ever to be written in Swedish” (Markers, 1979: 25).

In an interview with the critic Egil Törnqvist, Bergman stated the concept for his third production of *The Ghost Sonata*: “In the end, I have stressed the fact that the only thing that can give man any kind of salvation—a secular one—is the grace and compassion which come out of himself” (Törnqvist, 1973: 10). The director desired “the articulation of a less artificially ‘symbolic’ and hence more meaningful resolution to the last acts, in line with the concept of ‘secular salvation’” (Markers, 1979: 30). Bergman wished to accomplish two objectives in the process of applying his concept to *The Ghost Sonata*. First, he wanted to forge an organic relationship between the first two scenes of the play and the third one, which he considers anti-climactic and confused. And, second, he wanted to adopt “a far simpler actor-oriented approach to the production as a whole,” relying on the actors’ ability to

communicate meaning, tension, and “magic” without very much help from scenery, lighting, costumes, or make-up (Markers, 1979: 30). Bergman had been trying to achieve this second objective in the theater for some time, for he believed that

All true actors have magnetic power built in. They need only to reveal themselves on the stage for tension to be created. They themselves create the magic. A busy director can destroy that magic in an instant with too much scenery, lighting, and so on. He can de-theatricalize the actors. . . . If we underrate the audience’s ability to take note of [the] reactions [of the actors], we corrupt the theater. (Markers, 1979: 25, 30)

Underlying Ingmar Bergman’s thinking on *The Ghost Sonata* was his belief that “absolute word fidelity is trumpery in the theater. The text is not a prescription but raw material, a frequently hidden path into the writer’s consciousness” (Markers, 1979: 34). Now this is true, and it is not true. Certain plays more than others can bear alteration in the service of a concept that stems organically from the text. But before the altering is done, the text must be completely understood by the director. And I do not think that Bergman completely understood *The Ghost Sonata*, for all his work on three separate productions. His problems begin with his reading of the third and last scene. Bergman considers “the Student’s sudden turn-about from nihilistic despair to a newly gained faith in a benevolent God” to be one of the major difficulties of this scene (Törnqvist, 1973: 12). So he alters the ending. The Student does not gain new faith in a benevolent God in Bergman’s production. Instead, he reads “The Song of Sun” with a skeptical tone, whereas the tone of the lines is clearly one of optimistic affirmation, and he voices the last word of the song—“innocent” (or “good,” depending on the translation)—with utter disbelief before leaving the stage.

The Student’s final words of consolation to the Young Lady are spoken by the Mummy. According to Bergman, this change gives *The Ghost Sonata* a unity that it would not otherwise possess, since the Student now retains his nihilistic despair, learned from the old man Hummel. Bergman believes that the Student is “in reality a Hummel in embryo” (Markers, 1979: 33), and that Hummel initiates him into the world of despair and evil in the course of the play. The new ending also underscores a fundamental idea in Bergman’s production: “the fact that the Young Lady is slowly turning into another Mummy” (Markers, 1979: 33). Bergman had one actress play the parts of the Young Lady and the Mummy to suggest this idea in his production, and in his ending it is as if the Young Lady has literally become the Mummy, because

it is the latter who, through a quick costume change during “The Song of Sun,” pronounces the final benediction over her daughter, her former self as it were, conveniently placed behind a death screen.

Bergman further justifies giving the Student’s final lines to the Mummy by claiming that their content is remarkably similar to the content of the Mummy’s second-scene speech that destroys Hummel. Thus, in the director’s judgment, more thematic connection is established between the third scene and the rest of the play. The Student neither remains onstage with the “living dead” nor himself dies at the end; he simply exits, since “he is essentially just a student on a field trip to ‘this penal colony, madhouse and morgue of a world’” (Markers, 1979: 33). The Mummy sends the Young Lady off to Heaven with the last speech in the play, and she remains behind with the Colonel, among others. Thereby, believes Bergman, we are left with the idea that “the only thing that can give man any kind of salvation—a secular one—is the grace and compassion which come out of himself (Törnqvist, 1973: 10). Hell is other people, according to this view, and it is only the compassion of people like the Mummy that makes life bearable or can change matters for the better.

Bergman’s fundamental error in his interpretation of the third scene of *The Ghost Sonata* is to equate the Student’s “nihilistic despair” with atheism, with the loss of faith in God. The Student is disillusioned with *human life* after his encounter with Hummel and the inhabitants of the house, not with God. His faith in a benevolent God, in happiness and redemption in Heaven, is a logical outgrowth of his experiences during the play. If he is nihilistic (and if the play as a whole is pessimistic, as some have asserted), then it is only in the sense that he turns inside-out the traditional meaning of the passion of Christ. Instead of looking to Christ for release or relief from his unhappy existence, the Student redefines Christian salvation in his own terms. At the center he places, not salvation through Christ in this life, but salvation in Heaven through death.

Bergman argued for secular salvation through human compassion in his production of the play, as I have noted, and to be sure this idea is in the play—that we should try as hard as we can to be kind, loving, and compassionate during our stay on earth. But Bergman oversimplified the play, and thereby removed a large source of its power and fascination, by making the Student as evil as Hummel and by denying the Student’s conclusion that there can be no salvation in this life. Both ideas are present—that salvation in this life should be strived for, and that only salvation in Heaven is possible—and to remove one is not to interpret *The Ghost Sonata* anew, but to misunderstand and distort it. One must remember that it is the Student, the very person who concludes that salvation is possible only in Heaven, who recites “The

Song of Sun,” which exhorts man to be good and kind in life if other men are to behave the same toward him in return.

It is worth noting that Bergman never asks why Hummel wanted to initiate the Student into the world of evil. Is Hummel’s evil simply *there*, a given of the play and the world, to be spread for spreading’s sake? One would think so to judge from Bergman’s treatment of it. Yet, as any good actor knows, one cannot play a quality, an adjective onstage: one cannot “be evil”; one must play actions that reveal evil, and those actions must be motivated toward a goal or an objective. I don’t think we have to invent actions and goals for Hummel; I think that they are in the play. And I believe that an understanding of them, and the basic structure of the play, will make the Student’s part in events much clearer.

The Student becomes initiated into human existence in *The Ghost Sonata*. Göran Stockenström writes that “this initiation motif is symbolically underscored [right away] by the action of the dead Milkmaid, who bathes his eyes in order to restore their sight” (1978: 133). The Milkmaid is dead, yet the Student can see her, whereas Hummel cannot. The Milkmaid is dead because we are in the realm of the dead, an idea Bergman seems not to have considered and that, I would guess, few productions of the play have embodied. Stockenström, who has studied the various drafts of the play, reveals that “the idea of the mummy was originally intended to make it clear to the spectators that we now find ourselves among the dead” (1978: 144). It should be clear that in the play we are among the dead if for no other reason than the vanishing of the Hyacinth Room at the end and the appearance of Böcklin’s painting *The Island of the Dead* (1880-86). No one has killed the Student; he is already dead when the play begins, and his disappearance at the end confirms his death. The Student experiences, in death, a process of initiation into human existence that he did not receive in life, since he died at such a young age.

*The Ghost Sonata* is August Strindberg’s private mystery play, then. He knew how it was going to end in advance, just as the writers of medieval mystery plays knew how their plays were going to end. The Student would discover that truth, happiness, and salvation were possible only in Heaven. So, in order to make Heaven immediately accessible to the Student, Strindberg had to depict him as dead and untainted from the start. Paradoxically, he becomes initiated into human existence in death, when he passes through the three states of the Swedenborgian spiritual world. Strindberg was strongly influenced by the work of the Swedish mystic and religious philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, and he made the three scenes of *The Ghost Sonata* correspond to Swedenborg’s three states of life after death, the last reckoning with past existence (Sprinchorn, 1978).



According to Swedenborg's doctrine of the spiritual world, after death men are transported to the spiritual world or the lower earth. After their arrival the appearance of the newly fledged spirits remains unaltered and they can still conceal their thoughts and feelings as they could in life. Therefore many believe that they continue to reside in earthly existence. (Stockenström, 1978: 140)

This is state number one, the state of exteriors, corresponding to the world of social accommodation and social conventions. We see onstage the façade of an elegant apartment building at the start of Scene 1. The Milkmaid is an apparition whom the Student can see because he is a Sunday child (the Milkmaid stares at him in terror because he shouldn't be able to see her), one who, according to Scandinavian folklore, can see supernatural phenomena and possesses the gifts of prophecy and healing, all because he was born on a Sunday. The Student's name is Arkenholz (literally, ark wood), which suggests the saving vessel of the Bible. He has, he says, "spent the night bandaging wounds and taking care of the injured people" after a house-collapse.

Sunday child that he is, he was drawn to the location of the house right before it collapsed (even as he is drawn to the apartment building in the play before its "collapse"). He *thinks* he spent the night healing the wounded, but in fact he is dead. He died when the house collapsed; that is why the child he rescued from the building disappeared from his arms: being saved from death, the child remained in the natural world (Sprinchorn, 1978: 379). The Student saved the child from the collapse, but was crushed by it himself. He died with everyone else in the house. Since he is in the first state of the Swedenborgian spiritual world at the beginning of the play, he does not think he is dead; he presumes that, after the collapse, he did what any Sunday child would do: help the injured.

When Hummel shows him the story of the house-collapse in the newspaper, the old man says that the newspaper regrets it was "unable to obtain the name of the courageous young student. . . ." (579; Strindberg's ellipsis). Hummel cuts off his own sentence abruptly—thus the ellipsis—and the suggestion is that he would have continued as follows: ". . . who gave his life in order to save the child's." Hummel does not finish his sentence because he himself is dead and doesn't know it; to acknowledge that the Student standing before him is dead would be to acknowledge his own death. Hummel cannot see the Milkmaid early in Scene 1 precisely because she has been dead for a long time and is an apparition (he drowned her in Hamburg because "she was the only witness to a crime which he was afraid would come to light" [591]), whereas he thinks that he is still alive. By the end of Scene 1, as he becomes reconciled to his death and feels safe enough to mention

the Milkmaid to the Student and lie about what happened to her, he *can* see her (585). Hummel cannot see the Dead Man earlier in Scene 1 (583), even though he knows that this man is deceased, because to see him people would be, again, to acknowledge that he himself is dead.

At one point in Scene 1, Hummel says, “I’m going to die soon, I know that. But before I do there are a few things I want to take care of. . . . I have an infinitely long life behind me, infinitely long— . . . But before I die I want to make you happy” (582). Hummel is dead, he died recently, and these lines indicate that he is slowly realizing it. “All his life [Hummel’s] been looking for a Sunday child,” as Johansson says (584), because only a Sunday child, with its supernatural powers, its status as a child of God, as it were can enable him to take over state number two of the Swedenborgian spiritual world. This is the state of interiors, where, to quote Swedenborg, the human spirits become “visibly just what they had been in themselves while in the world, what they then did and said secretly being now made manifest” (Swedenborg cited by Sprinchorn, 1978: 379).

Hummel knows he is evil and that, like the Colonel, he has concealed or fabricated parts of his past. By having the Student marry his natural daughter, the Young Lady, who lives in the apartment building as the daughter of the Colonel and the Mummy, Hummel hopes to take over the dwelling—he has already bought up all of the Colonel’s outstanding promissory notes, so that in effect he owns the place. He wants to drive out everyone but himself, the Young Lady, and the Student, and thus prevent his being exposed and sent to Hell. Johansson declares that Hummel is after power (584): he had it in life, where he was a thief, usurer, speculator, and murderer; he has it in state number one, right after he dies—he still controls Johansson and the Beggars, he controls the police, and he dupes the Student into “helping” him by making the young man feel obligated for a debt his father never owed Hummel; and he wants the power to halt God’s judgment of him.

Without the knowledge that the three scenes of *The Ghost Sonata* correspond to the three states of the Swedenborgian spiritual world, and that Hummel’s action in the play is to attempt to halt the reckoning process by seizing state number two, Ingmar Bergman was misled in his 1973 production of the play into thinking that the Student inherited evil from Hummel. In fact, the Student discovers how evil Hummel is as well as how difficult and painful life is, and how deceived he, the inexperienced *student*, was. Hummel was not what he appeared to be in state number one, and people in life are never what they appear to be. All, ultimately, is—and can be nothing other than—deception, violation, and misery: entrapment in the prison of one’s own mind and needs.

The Student sums up:

I thought it was paradise when I saw you [the Young Lady] come in here [the apartment building] for the first time. . . . [Strindberg's ellipsis] It was a Sunday morning, and I stood looking into these rooms. I saw a colonel who wasn't a colonel. I had a magnanimous benefactor [Hummel] who turned out to be a bandit, and had to hang himself. I saw a mummy who wasn't one, and a maiden who—speaking of which, where can one find virginity? Where is beauty to be found? In nature, and my mind when it's all dressed up in its Sunday clothes. Where do honor and faith exist? In fairy tales and children's games! Where can you find anything that fulfills its promise? Only in one's imagination! (595)

The Student gets his knowledge from the events of Scene 2.

The mistake Hummel makes, in attempting to take over state number two, to possess the apartment building, is in thinking that he can expose others without being exposed himself. He overestimates his own power and underestimates the power of God, who has prescribed the behavior of the residents of state number two of the spiritual world. The interior of the apartment building stands for state number two, because this interior is the exterior of the building, the façade, laid bare. In state number two, to elaborate on Swedenborg's description of it,

The human spirits can no longer hide their thoughts. As feature after feature is stripped away, all hypocrisy dissolves, and the exterior is transformed into a mirror-image of the interior condition. The ultimate objective of this differentiation of spirits is to unmask the person's true self, so there emerges a complete correspondence between the outer appearance and the inner reality. . . . The truly evil spirits are . . . taken directly to a hell which corresponds to their inner selves. (Stockenström, 1978: 140, 148)

Once he enters state number two, Hummel can do nothing but unmask others: that is the nature of state number two of the Swedenborgian spiritual world. He is warned against exposing the Colonel by the Mummy, but still he must expose this man. He wants not only to possess the apartment building and unite in it two people who know nothing about his past—the Student and the Young Lady—but also to punish and expel from the building all those who, he feels, have wronged him or otherwise sinned. The list includes the Colonel, who is not a nobleman and not a colonel, and who once seduced Hummel's fiancée; the Mummy, the Colonel's wife, whose daughter, the Young Lady, is really her child by Hummel, and who has had a further

affair with Baron Skanskorg; the Woman in Black, the illegitimate daughter of the Superintendent's Wife and the Dead Man, and the fiancée of Baron Skanskorg, who is divorcing another of the Dead Man's daughters in order to marry her.

Hummel, indeed, is setting himself up as a God figure in his own right, the Devil who will, through his Antichrist, the Student, establish his own sphere of influence or take over God's spiritual realm altogether. Of course, he is defeated. He exposes the Colonel's past, in the process turning him, externally, into what he is internally. The Colonel is a former valet and, stripped of his wig, false teeth, moustache, and metal corset, he becomes one. With Bengtsson's help, the Mummy then exposes Hummel. He himself is turned, externally, into what he is internally, what he really is: an insect; a kitchen parasite; a usurer or bloodsucker. Strindberg describes what happens to him during the Mummy's and Bengtsson's verbal onslaughts: "The Old Man . . . has collapsed in his chair and shriveled up, and, like a dying insect, he shrivels up more and more during the final dialogue" (590).

Paradoxically, and triumphantly, it is the Mummy who leads the way in the exposure of Hummel. Her horrifying mummified condition is her true self: dead to the feelings of others, withered spiritually. The beautiful white marble statue of a young woman in her home is "a monument to her pretty, perishable mask in life" (Stockenström, 1978: 144), her once false exterior. The Mummy "has chosen to speak like a soulless parrot," writes Göran Stockenström, "since language in the service of thought is intended from the start to conceal and deceive" (1978: 144). The Mummy speaks the absolute truth, however, when she unmasks Hummel, when, through the grace of God, she punishes him for his presumption and cruelty. He will go straight to Hell. The Mummy and the Colonel, for their part, will remain in state number two (as they do, and as we see them do, throughout Scene 3), a kind of Purgatory, to try to "wipe out the past, and undo what is done. Not with bribes, not with threats—but through suffering and repentance" (590).

The Mummy and the Colonel have admitted their sins, have surrendered their pretensions, and will sit in silence as long as necessary to purify themselves. Not only did Hummel refuse to confess his sins and humble himself before God, but he also wished in his thoroughgoing evil to usurp God's power, and for this he had to be condemned to Hell. It is no accident in the play that the Student is a student of languages in particular and life in general. He learns from the events of Scene 2 that words by their very nature deceive, since they can never fully express the thoughts of their speaker and are often used to express the opposite of what the speaker means. And he learns that appearances deceive, that people are never what they seem to be and appear to need to be something in life other than what they truly are.

The Student concludes from this that, essentially, life is not worth living, that only in life after death can perfection be found: absolute truth, pure bliss, and true salvation. He has thus been initiated into human existence.

Scene 3, which takes place in the Hyacinth Room, represents the third state of man after death, “a place of instruction and preparation for those who may merit a place in heaven” (Sprinchorn, 1978: 379). What the Student learns here, and what the Young Lady already seems to know, is that their union, as planned by Hummel, is impossible now except in Heaven. The hyacinth “hates” and “detests” the Student (592) because he is unwilling to accept imperfection, or “trials and tribulations,” in this life, whereas the Young Lady is willing to do so: she loves the hyacinth, and this flower loves her in return. The hyacinth represents the imperfection, the paradox, of this world: that out of filth—dirt—comes beauty, that out of (original) sin can come eternal salvation through proper repentance. (In the legend of the flower, the paradox is that out of the blood of Hyacinthus, who was slain by Apollo, arose the life of the hyacinth.)

The Young Lady is a creature of this world who has long since been initiated into the everyday drudgeries of human existence, the struggle to survive from day to day. She feels that she experiences the drudgeries of life all the more acutely in her home as a punishment for the sins of her family; she is trapped and guesses that “this is how it’s supposed to be” (593). The Young Lady is a victim who seems not to have sinned egregiously herself, but who has accepted or endured the sins, the imperfections, of others. She is a proponent of the secular salvation that the Student ultimately rejects, of patience, gentleness, and compassion as the answer to the problems of this life: that is why, throughout Scene 3, she keeps telling the Student to wait. He desires union with her; she knows that there can be no Heaven on earth, no spiritual salvation, finally, in secular salvation. The Student has rejected this life for life in the hereafter; the Young Lady, however, has not.

The Student calls for music twice in Scene 3 and does not get it—the harp remains mute until the end of the play—because, again, there can be no Heaven on earth. Music is to drama as Heaven is to earth. Music is pure form, free, unlike the drama, of the illusions of natural forms, conceptual content, or moral purpose. In the same way, Heaven, or eternal life in Heaven, is divine bliss, free, unlike life on earth, of deception, violation, and drudgery; there is no conflict or struggle on high: all is one, one is all. The whole of *The Ghost Sonata* can be seen as a striving, in the dramatic equivalent of sonata form, toward the purity and absoluteness of music, culminating in the obliteration of the dramatic form at the end for actual music.

The play is a “ghost sonata” not in the sense that we get an actual musical sonata, of course, but in the sense that we get a ghost of one, in dramatic form.

This is a tremendous irony, because, normally, music would be thought of as the “ghost” of drama, since it does not represent the human form. Here drama is the “ghost” of music, because its human forms are ghosts, in a sense—they are all dead—and because the human form, in its deception, its imprisonment in appearances, is the true ghost of, or artificial substitute for, musical form, where there can be no hiding behind appearances, where what you hear is all there is to hear.

Hence it is not by chance that, in Scene 1, Hummel sends the Student to a production Wagner’s *Die Walküre* (1870), where he will meet the Young Lady. Wagner was a proponent of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the “total work of art” that combined music and drama—that, according to the terms of my argument here, tried to create a Heaven on earth. The Student represents the musical or Heavenly aspect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the great music-drama, and the Young Lady stands for the dramatic or earthbound aspect. The Student sees true salvation as possible only in death, in Heaven, and, once the Young Lady rejects his second call for music, he sees union with her as being possible only in Heaven. Music is a form of salvation to the Student, and he calls for it in Scene 3 when he feels himself “sinking into the earth” (593), being pulled down inescapably by the obstacles and illusion of life on earth.

As Walter Sokel writes,

[Music] is an art untranslatable into any terms of external experience. Such an art is salvation for two reasons. It takes man out of the snare of practical concerns . . . , and it unmask[s] the senseless struggle for existence which both logic and morality serve by seeking to regulate it instead of doing away with it, and makes us behold the truth . . . But in the very process of revealing the meaninglessness of Reality, music creates form and meaning. It captures [formlessness] in man-made form. . . . Music becomes man’s salvation . . . because it liberates man from delusion, initiates him into knowledge, and creates meaning in a meaningless universe. It is not a means to redemption; it is redemption itself. (24-25)

In his 1973 production of *The Ghost Sonata*, Ingmar Bergman conceived of the Student’s “unmasking” of the Young Lady as an unmasking and *murder*, corresponding to the Mummy’s unmasking of Hummel in Scene 2 (Törnqvist, 1973: 10). Bergman had the Student, at one point in his long speech at the end of the play (before “The Song of Sun”), “brutally spread [the Young Lady’s] thighs and thrust his hand between her legs” (Markers, 1979: 34). Later in the same speech, Bergman had the Student



in a paroxysm of anger and frustration, [drag] his adversary forcibly to the front of the stage; she sank to her knees in anguish, her dress tore loose and fell from her in tatters. Beneath it, she wore a ragged and soiled undergarment of grayish white—virtually a mummy’s winding sheet!—streaked with red down the sides and in the folds of the crotch. (Markers, 1979: 34)

So, in Bergman’s interpretation, the Student practically rapes the Young Lady, and then his stream of words finally kills her.

Clearly, however, there is no comparison between what the Mummy does to Hummel and what the Student does to the Young Lady. Hummel collapses and shrivels up like a dying insect under the Mummy’s barrage of words at the end of Scene 2; before going into the closet, he imitates a parrot, a rooster, and a cuckoo clock. He is dehumanized for his evil, as he deserves to be. The Young Lady merely collapses, and the death screen is discreetly placed in front of her. If the Student kills the Young Lady, it is truly a mercy killing, not the vicious murder Bergman makes it out to be in keeping with his notion that the Student is a nihilistically despairing Hummel at the end of the play. The Young Lady has mostly suffered in this life—her relationship with the ubiquitous Cook attests to that, while her relationship with the hyacinths, which are kept inside a special room in the house, suggests that the happy and beautiful moments of her life have been rare and delicate.

The hyacinths quickly disappear from the conversation in Scene 3, whereas the Cook menacingly appears onstage twice and is discussed in two passages of dialogue. The Young Lady guesses that the world is as it is supposed to be, as I have noted. This may be true, but the Student believes that he can show her a world, in Heaven, where matters are different and where the two of them can be united. Naturally the Young Lady is afraid, but only in the way anyone would be who was being prepared for a journey into the unknown. The Student does not kill her (she is dead already anyway—this is probably the most compelling evidence that the Student doesn’t kill her): rather, “[he] functions here as a vastating spirit, confronting her with the ugly truths of life and removing from her the evils and falsities of that life in order that she may receive the influx of goods and truths from heaven. As he speaks to her, she pines and withers away” (Sprinchorn, 1978: 379).

The Student saves the Young Lady from the Cook and a Housemaid. The Cook, a member of the “Hummel family of vampires” (593), attempts to rob the Young Lady of her sustenance in the same way that Hummel tried to rob the Colonel, the Mummy, and others of their house. The Young Lady says that she is “wasting away, withering” (593), that the Cook is eating her up. The Student simply completes the process, to her eternal benefit.



He prepares her for Heaven; he speaks the absolute truth, which is all that is known there. Out of the pain of her purification, which pain is the final “imperfection” of her life, will come the beauty of her beatification, the achievement of perfection in Heaven.

Indeed, the Student welcomes the Young Lady into Heaven as would an angel, not a murderer:

Your liberator is coming! Welcome, pale and gentle one. . . . And you, you beautiful, innocent, lost soul, who suffer for no fault of your own, sleep, sleep a dreamless sleep. And when you wake again . . . may you be greeted by a sun that doesn't scorch, in a home without dust, by friends without faults, and by a love without flaw. . . . You poor little child! Child of this world of illusion and guilt and suffering and death—this world of eternal change and disappointment and never-ending pain. May the Lord of Heaven have mercy on you as you journey forth. . . . (596)

Ingmar Bergman believes that the third scene of *The Ghost Sonata*, as written, is anti-climactic, that the real climax of the play occurs in Scene 2 when the Mummy exposes Hummel (Törnqvist, 1973: 10). One of the reasons he had the Student act so violently toward the Young Lady and “murder” her with words, in his 1973 production, was to add more “drama,” more excitement to a scene that he thought was flat in its placement after Hummel's downfall. The director wanted the true climax of the play to occur in Scene 3, in the confrontation between the Student and the Young Lady. Had he understood the musical structure of *The Ghost Sonata*, Bergman would have seen that there was no need to speak so much in terms of climaxes, of traditional or linear dramatic form. The three scenes of *The Ghost Sonata* correspond, not only to the three states of the Swedenborgian spiritual world, but also to the three sections of sonata form: exposition, development, and recapitulation, the last usually followed by a coda (Jarvi, 77).

According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*,

In the exposition the composer introduces the musical ideas, consisting essentially of a first and second theme connected by a bridge passage. The second theme is in a different key from the first, normally the key of the dominant if the tonic is major, or the key of the relative major if the tonic is minor. . . . The development is the central section of the movement, in position as well as emotional impact. Such devices as melodic fragmentation, rapid harmonic modulation, and contrapuntal combination of different motifs are used to produce the special character of “development,” “dynamic tension,”

“increased temperature,” “fighting forces,” etc., one or both of the themes from the exposition being used as the point of departure. The recapitulation normally contains all the material of the exposition . . . One modification is obligatory, namely, that the second theme appear in the tonic (not, as before, in the dominant or relative major). Thus the whole movement closes in the tonic. The coda, usually a closing statement of moderate length, sometimes assumes considerable proportions and even becomes another development section. (791-794)

Like a real sonata, *The Ghost Sonata* even includes an introduction: the initial pantomime involving the Woman in Black, the Superintendent’s Wife, Hummel, and the Milkmaid. The “exposition,” Scene 1, introduces the first theme, the Student, then the second theme, Hummel, and connects them by means of the “bridge passage,” the apartment building with its various inhabitants who stand upstage of these two characters or “themes.” Each theme is repeated a second time and connected once again by means of the “bridge passage,” before a small “coda” ends the “exposition”: the reappearance of the Milkmaid, the first person the Student spoke to upon walking onstage.

The “development,” Scene 2, uses the second theme, Hummel, as its point of departure, and has him expose the Colonel and attack the “ghost-diners” for the sins of their lives before he himself is exposed by the Mummy and Bengtsson. The Milkmaid appears for the third time, then the Student recites “The Song of Sun,” the “connecting passage” between Scenes 2 and 3. The “recapitulation” is a reconsideration of the opposing Student- and Hummel-themes from the exposition by means of the (aborted) confrontation between the Student (in the company of the Young Lady) and the Cook. The Student, the first theme, is in the dominant key here, while Hummel, the second theme, appears in the tonic key in the person of the Cook.

The “coda” takes up the rest of Scene 3 and is extensive, a second development, if you will. The Student “exposes” the Young Lady or, more accurately, exposes the truth about life in the process of restating the events of the entire play. Raymond Jarvi writes that,

As the Mummy’s articulation of [the “exposure” motif] in the terminal phase of the development proved fatal to . . . Hummel, so also is Arkenholz’s definitive statement of the “exposure” motif here in the concluding moments that force which thrusts the action of the drama itself into its second and final climactic moment, namely, the death of Adèle [that is, the preparation of the Young Lady for Heaven by removing from her the taint of evil and falsity she has acquired simply

by existing]. As the Mummy petitioned God for mercy for the soul of Jacob Hummel, so also does Arkenholz extend his compassion to the soul of Adèle after her embarkation with the “Liberator” that, in the context of the play, death is. (84)

“The Song of Sun,” which concluded Scene 2, the “development,” is then reprised at the end of the play.

Now there are two climaxes in *The Ghost Sonata*—the exposure of Hummel and the preparation of the Young Lady for Heaven—and, if Hummel’s exposure seemed to Ingmar Bergman to be more “dramatic” or startling, a reversal, that’s because it is one, though this does not necessarily make it more important to the meaning of the play than the second “exposure.” If we are attuned to the sonata-like form of *The Ghost Sonata*, we will expect a “recapitulation” of the “exposition” (Scene 1) after Scene 2, with the first theme, the Student, in the dominant key. We will expect something to develop out of Hummel’s exposure, and we will grasp that the very repetitiveness of the “recapitulation” has something to do with the freedom or purity, the blissfulness, of the musical form—its self-containment, its urge, and content, to feed on itself.

Furthermore, we will expect a “coda” both to grow out of the “recapitulation” and itself possibly to recapitulate the “development” (Scene 2). So what I am saying is that the very “anti-climactic” nature of the third scene is a comment on its meaning, and a foreshadowing of the end of the play: the Student and the Young Lady will find peace and salvation in Heaven, where time and the linear progression of traditional drama will stop, where these two people will simply *be* and not do; where they will, so to speak, repeat themselves over and over without fear, ever again, of judgment of any kind. According to the musical scheme of the play, then, it is necessary that the third scene appear, as it were, anti-climactic.

Throughout this essay I have attacked Ingmar Bergman’s concept, imposed on *The Ghost Sonata*, that “the only thing that can give man any kind of salvation—a secular one—is the grace and compassion which come out of himself (Törnqvist, 1973: 10). To repeat, this idea is in the play, but I do not believe that it is presented with the force of the other idea: that salvation in Heaven, through death, is the only real salvation possible. I am assuming that Bergman distorted the meaning of *The Ghost Sonata* in order to make the play more “relevant” to modern-day, not-so-God-fearing audiences, and in order to give it somewhat of an “upbeat” quality (“life can be better if we all try harder”).

Bergman’s conception of the play as a dream, however—and his staging of it as a dream in the 1954 and 1973 productions—could have led him to a

more complete understanding of its meaning had he followed this conception through to its logical conclusion. During rehearsals for the 1973 production, he told Egil Törnqvist that

the whole play is a dream—fairly realistic at the beginning, but growing more and more grotesque as the action develops. It is not a dream of any one of the characters, although in my Malmö production the assumption was that the Student was the dreamer—but that didn't make sense, because he is not always on the stage. No, it is the dream of Strindberg himself. Notice how we move inwards in the play, from the street to the round room and from there to the hyacinth room. Strindberg takes us by the hand and we enter deeper and deeper into the dream. (1973: 6)

I would agree that the play can be seen as Strindberg's dream, and I would add that it can be looked at in this manner, not only because its movement is from the outside to the inside, but also because during any one scene of the play, we can see upstage into a part of the set that will be or has been the locus of action during another scene. During Scene 1, we can see into the Round Room from the street; during Scene 2, we can see from the Round Room into a Green Room and into the Hyacinth Room; and during Scene 3, we can see into the Round Room from the Hyacinth Room. The impression we get from this is of a mind at work, keeping things or ideas in suspension, or keeping one thing "in the back," in the background, while it occupies itself with something else in the foreground.

The harp music itself toward the end of Scene 2 originates in the Hyacinth Room and should therefore be viewed, if we regard the play as Strindberg's dream, as a foreshadowing of the ending of the play. It is as if Strindberg's mind is racing ahead to the play's conclusion (which takes place in the Hyacinth Room, with identical harp music and the identical song), or is keeping that conclusion in suspension at its back, in the background, at the same time that other events (in the Round Room) occupy its "front," the foreground.

There is further evidence, more thematically significant, for the play as Strindberg's dream. At the end of Scenes 2 and 3, the Student recites "The Song of Sun," an Icelandic poem probably written about 1200 (Jarvi, 81). The song depicts "a deceased father's exhortations to his son. In the form of a dream the father discloses his experiences of the moment of death, the moment when the soul leaves the stiffened corpse and beholds the glory of the Lord" (Stockenström, 1978: 135). In other words, it is as if the play itself is the dream of a dead or dying man: all the people in the dream could then

by extension be dead, as the characters in the play in fact are. Once the play ends, the dying man/dreamer actually dies, or the already dead man/dreamer becomes “silent” forever—like Strindberg himself. As he was writing *The Ghost Sonata* in 1907, according to Egil Törnqvist, Strindberg was slowly dying, “suffering . . . from the first symptoms of the cancer that five years later would cause his death” (1973: 7).

“The Song of Sun” urges man on to a secular salvation; *The Ghost Sonata* as a whole argues for salvation from the misery of this life in Heaven, through death. Salvation in death wins out over salvation in life in the play if only because the knowledge, the deepest truth, in the words of “The Song of Sun,” that “Man reaps as he sows; / Blessed is he / Who sows the good” (591), comes—to the Student or anyone else—only in death. One sees the light only when the light of life is no longer there, and the suggestion is that the “deepest truth” about life does not dawn on anyone, or is not taken seriously by anyone, until it is too late.

The secular salvation of “The Song of Sun” is what the Student/Strindberg would like to have seen in operation in human existence; such salvation is the last narcotized wish of a dying or dead man. The divine salvation that the Student attains is what he knows to be available to him in death, on account of his innocence (or available to someone else on account of his or her repentance). Had Bergman understood “The Song of Sun” as the recitation of a dead man, as knowledge that one can truly attain only in death, perhaps he would not have staged *The Ghost Sonata* as a plea for the display of grace and compassion in this life.

I think that the best idea to come out of his production was his conception of the play as a dream. I am convinced that, intellectually, Bergman’s production was a failure, a gross distortion of Strindberg’s work. But visually, his production was probably a success, because of his notion of the play as a dream. Like Bergman, I believe that it is wrong to weight this play down with elaborate scenery, lights, costumes, and make-up, if only because of the “heaviness” of its ideas in the first place. Everything in the 1973 Stockholm production, according to Bergman, was “immediate, naked, simple. Simple costumes, hardly any make-up. The characters are no monsters, but human beings” (Törnqvist, 1973: 6).

Like the landscape of a dream, the stage itself was nearly empty; it was also slightly raked. Even the advertisement kiosk of the first scene was dispensed with. Bergman said,

There [could] be nothing to block the action and make it seem heavy-going. . . . We [had] few properties, very few things, nothing

that [could] distract from the faces. The important thing [was] what [happened] to the bodies. They [had to] make a choreographic pattern which [had to] be completely disengaged from the room and from the scenery. (Törnqvist, 1973: 7)

The actors moved, then, as if they inhabited a dream. At the back of the stage were two huge white concave screens. On them were projected most of the scenery and properties: houses of the turn-of-the-century type, the marble statue, the clock, etc., appearing when needed, then fading out. Between the second and third scenes the face of the aged, cancer-ridden Strindberg was projected onto the drop: dreaming his play, in death, or perhaps dreaming it in a production whose intellectual resolution was different from that given it by Ingmar Bergman.

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## “Bertolt Brecht the Naturalist, the Theatricalist, and the Dramatist-as-Director: Notes, Mostly on *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Life of Galileo*”

“Monstrously delicate” is how Brecht described his poetry (as recalled by Eric Bentley in his “Brecht Memoir,” 8). The same might be said of Brecht’s plays—and of the task of staging them. In the United States particularly, directing Brecht is a process that never seems to go right; one reads or hears of rather frequent Brecht productions in the network of university and regional theaters, but seldom do they spur much enthusiasm, seldom is a real Brechtian satisfied. The cliché persists with few rebuttals: American artists don’t seem to know what to do with Brecht’s plays.

Given the elusiveness of the *Echt*, or “pure,” Brecht (in production or in production style), one is naturally tempted to idealize Brecht’s own stagings at the Berliner Ensemble. Those stagings, now legendary, have browbeaten a generation of theater artists and set a standard that is ineradicable, yet indecipherable: for we sense the superiority of the original stagings without being able to reproduce it. Dutiful imitation is the height of our achievement, and it is poor imitation at that: we manage to bypass the famous power, clarity, and humanity of the original, and reproduce only the grayness, the monotony, of the Berliner Ensemble *Modellbücher* (*Model-Books*) photos in dispiritingly familiar, derivative, and hollow revivals.

Clearly, we have fallen into a trap, albeit one set by Brecht himself. We idealize his stage direction uncritically, failing to discriminate between letter and spirit in the “law” of the *Modellbücher*. Further, because a theatrical style is the most fragile and impermanent of artistic codes, we court the clear and present danger of confining Brecht’s plays in what are now overfamiliar and dated theatrical practices—practices that have fossilized at the Berliner Ensemble itself since the playwright’s death a generation ago. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the international acclaim for Brecht’s own productions when they were first seen, nor avoid the impression that those plays became something greater under the playwright’s direction. This wayward genius’s eccentric, elusive way with actors and with *mise-en-scène* seems to have added new ranges of signification, a new fullness of import and meaning, to his texts. For this reason, there can be no complete understanding of the plays that does not consider these celebrated productions.

This section of my essay is intended as a beginning effort in a much-needed analysis of Brecht’s directing style—both as a dramaturgy of texts and a “theaterturgy” of stagings, aimed at discovering some of the principles

which underlie the distracting plenitude of discussable details that Brecht crowded onto Berlin's Schiffbauerdamm stage. It is an axiom of this study that Brecht's direction tapped the power of his own scripts through a precise, organic connection between play and production. If this is true, analysis of the plays and of their stagings must interpenetrate: the play as written becomes a guide to understanding Brecht's staging, and the staging reveals the play. One hopes that, when this project is finally and fully addressed (as can only be done tentatively and in the way of foundations here), it will facilitate new productions that can incorporate new theatrical environments, vocabularies, and conventions without betraying a Brecht play's own structure, techniques, and dramatic identity.

Before turning to Brecht's directing, let me say that his criticism itself must be read critically; only then can it help to deepen our understanding of his dramaturgical procedures. This is particularly true of his persistent inveighing against the tradition of naturalism, and of his sometimes hyperbolic claims for having utterly rejected its techniques. In fact, if one were to say outright that Brecht was a naturalistic director, the error would be only partial. For the textural aspects of naturalism appealed to Brecht's taste a great deal. His careful attention to realistic stage "business," the use of real objects bought in markets rather than stage property simulations, the love of the unadorned textures of real wood, metal, leather, and fabric—all these manifest a personal, visual, and tactile sensitivity that brought a number of naturalistic surfaces onto Brecht's stage, and in so doing insured an appearance of realism, a particular kind of verisimilitude.

Of course, aside from its sensual value, verisimilitude was tonally and ideationally important to Brecht, since it manifested his yearning for a proletarian authenticity. That is why, although he was a great (and self-promoting) theatrical stylist, Brecht was nevertheless suspicious of the impulse toward style. (I am consciously using the word in the customary, if somewhat imprecise way that comes readily to hand in a mimetic age: "style" as anything—including photographic realism—that differs from undifferentiated reality.) He wanted to encourage an audience to peer beneath familiar surfaces so as to discover the political and moral truths that are often undetected in daily living—yet he wanted to leave those surfaces, those outward appearances and manifestations of reality, as undisturbed and undistorted as possible. This, of course, constitutes a fundamental ambiguity: a naturalistic impulse and an anti-naturalistic one mated.

This opposition of impulses yields a kind of Brechtian hermeneutics, in which the audience is impelled to recognize—and more, to penetrate and pass through—familiar appearances in order to seek out a truth that is implied but never explicitly stated. Audience members proceed imaginatively from their

own time and space through a fictional realm of more or less realistically rendered events, until they come to a plane of partially defined sources of insight, a plane beyond common appearances, beyond customary ways of seeing. This implicit progression changes the nature of the natural, making it both an oracle and a veil. Thus the term “naturalism” will not do here. Brecht opposed the “natural” ways of seeing that the word implies. He tried to appropriate the word “realism” from the socialist realists, but this term, too, has the wrong connotations. For this essay, I shall call Brecht’s peculiar verisimilitude “the lifelike,” insofar as the word can imply both a similarity to and a difference from the “life” of objective reality. To study Brecht’s dramaturgy and staging must necessarily be to study the lifelike—and the half-disguised, half-exposed techniques with which Brecht violated lifelikeness, shaping experience to his ideas without too severely disturbing its familiar appearance.

For all its incorporation of lifelike elements, however, Brecht’s practice clearly differed from any strictly mimetic drama, and Brecht liked to make much of that difference. Unfortunately, he tended to state the matter in somewhat confusing terms, centering on the loosely deployed word *Verfremdung*. In the larger sense, *Verfremdung* is the key concept in Brecht’s aesthetic, the umbrella term that covers all his methods of alerting the audience to a special critical awareness of the dramatic action. In this full sense, the term covers a great many different features of Brecht’s work: the exotic settings, for example; the use of verse or song to heighten a point in the dramatic argument; an instance of dramaturgical juxtaposition in which a character’s most earnest statement is made ironic by an unexpected context.

This is *Verfremdung*, then, as a general or categorical term, covering a number of dramatic and theatrical devices—but only when those devices are used for the specific purpose of surprising the audience into a higher, and more critical, awareness. No device is inherently a *Verfremdungseffekt*. And it was on this point that Brecht himself created confusion, by applying the general term to a smaller and more specific instance of itself, thus blurring principle and example. That is, Brecht came to use the general term *Verfremdung* as a synonym for what a theater historian would more rightly call theatricalism—meaning nothing more than the use of frankly theatrical devices, such as masks, non-illusionary settings, visible scene changes, and the like. Brecht assumed that dressing the *mise-en-scène* with theatricalist elements—which in a loose sense could mean anything non-mimetic—would naturally lead the audience to the elusive wakefulness of *Verfremdung*.

This is, inferably, related to Brecht’s misreading of Viktor Shklovsky, whose *ostrannenie* was a direct ancestor of Brecht’s neologistic *Verfremdung*: where Shklovsky proposed an artistic practice that made one aware of the

artist's materials, Brecht added an assumption that this attention to the artistic medium would necessarily draw an audience into contemplating the larger outlines of the dramatic argument. Any good Prague semiologist could have shown Brecht that theatricalism doesn't always work that way; many august Brechtians have made the same argument; and Brecht himself acknowledged the problem, as if on the sly, in the *Short Organum* (1949; *Brecht on Theatre*, 191-192). Yet Brecht continued to function as if on faith, on a willed belief that with the use of theatricalist decoration, he could solve the extremely subtle problem of controlling his audience's sympathy with push-button ease. It became a kind of never-ending refrain in Brecht's self-explanations: every sharply defined stylistic touch became not itself but another *Verfremdungseffekt*, and the *Verfremdung* was supposed to suit and explain virtually everything Brecht did.

The result is an imprecise and reductive vision of Brecht's writing and staging, although a vision that Brecht himself engineered. It suggests that every non-mimetic device in Brecht's extremely heterogeneous staging style is equivalent to every other in intention and effect; worse, it fosters the belief that theatricalist mannerisms are what make Brecht—so that any production, of any kind of play, which uses a visible scene-change is suddenly understood to be “Brechtian.” Words like “Brechtian” and “defamiliarization” (or its less adequate synonym “alienation”) are drained of meaning in this way, and any precise perceiving of Brecht's work and methods dissolves into a blurred understanding.

If we were to reverse this distorted vision, we would come closer to the truth. Brecht's non-realistic passages and elements are not synonymous and uniform, but diverse, and they are directed toward discrete, separable effects. (Thus, an exposed lighting instrument is not the equivalent of a mask, and an ironic song is not a non-realistic setting.) Moreover, theatricalism in itself is not some Quintessence of Brechtianism. On the contrary, some of Brecht's theatricalist habits are inessential and decorative, while others are indispensable manifestations of central traits in his playwriting. Such distinctions have to be made before the relations among play, production, and theoretical criticism can yield a useful understanding.

The following notes will offer initial explanations of a number of the non-realistic elements in Brecht's stagings, attempting a kind of anatomy or phenomenology of style. That these are what I shall call “first principles” is true in a double sense: in that this analysis is only a beginning that will leave a great deal still to be explored, and in that these principles operate on a primary level, one of deep structure, giving order and predicating dramaturgical patterns. It is important that the incompleteness of these notes be kept in mind, for there is a risk of falling into Brecht's own trap of analyzing his

work too narrowly, or of presumptively categorizing every element of the Brecht stage as if it were only another interchangeable element in an abstruse intellectual design. Brecht's work is only partly susceptible to systematic analysis; there is an impulsive, improvisational quality to his writing and staging, and an eccentric beauty to both, that, while important, can only be peripherally addressed here, since my investigation is aimed at what I have called the "hermeneutics"—the significations—of the Brecht stage.

### Principles of Directed Attention, or the Heightening of Detail

Stage naturalism—in theory—presumes an accidental quality, a sense of dispersed focus and a prizing of each available locus for the viewer's attention. There is in it at least a pretense of a minimal distortion of experience, a renouncing of manipulation and artifice. (That theatrical naturalism promised this, yet tended to include frankly melodramatic contrivances, was part of what spurred Brecht's disgust for the style—and his preference for relaxed tonalities and disjointed structures.) Brecht's distinctive staging style begins with a rejection of dispersed focus: he specialized in subtly directing his audience's attention so as to arouse a special, penetrating awareness that might withstand distraction.

Characteristically, Brecht loved to direct his audience's attention to the suggestive detail, the small, barely noticeable gesture that bears a huge meaning. This is the vision that sees importance in a general's handling of a bar of soap, draws proud attention to Helene Weigel's way of biting a coin, finds an important hidden meaning in Weigel's accentuation of a single word in Courage's lullaby to the dead Katrin, and insists that a fugitive aristocrat in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945) would be unable to copy a poor man's way of eating.

Accordingly, staging methods for Brecht's plays need to include a way of drawing the audience's attention to selected, significant details. This is a principle that shapes not only the performance, but the writing of the plays as well. For instance, characterization tends to be built through selective emphasis. With most of his secondary characters, there are only a few traits that are important to Brecht, and, accordingly, he highlights them. Consider the photographs of the masks for *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* (1948) in *Theaterarbeit* (1952), where one can see the "typicality" of characters—the absurdity and obtuseness of the judge, the strangely cold and almost brutal quality Brecht sought to bring out in Puntila. We learn about these characters only what we need to know so that they can fill their place in the drama, but we learn it in a striking, theatrical way.

Significantly, these masks are only very subtly distortive. It would be possible to glance at these figures and see them not as masked "types," but

only as unusually vivid characterizations in costume, bearing, and make-up. Always reluctant to stretch the lifelike too far, Brecht saw to it that such physical distortion remained subtle, a matter of stressed detail that moves us immediately into the realm of his idiosyncratic, mannerist realism. With somewhat less subtlety, but by means of a similar process, characters are simplified into an exaggerated essence by the cruder and more obviously theatrical masks of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Even without masks, one can see traces of the same thing in the clearly defined postures of the actors in each of their many characterizations as they are shown in *Theaterarbeit*; and perhaps this was the essence of the doctrine of “gestic” acting—a distinctive, if slight, exaggeration of bodily gesture that makes the essential (and for Brecht that means social) traits of the character unusually readable and clear.

The same kind of selectivity and reliance on detail can be found in Brecht’s language. One example might be a phrase in the rubric to the first scene of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), which is usually translated “Mother Courage loses a son,” but more precisely would be “Mother Courage comes to lose a son”—a subtle difference that makes a point, since Brecht’s effort with this linguistic detail seems to be to draw our attention, not to the fact that Courage loses Eilif, but to the way (that is, the reason) that she comes to lose him, which is the essence of the play in miniature.

In short, Brecht’s “realism” is colored and subtly reshaped into something cryptic, suggestive, delicately distorted—a quietly formalized version of reality not unlike the Ernst Barlach sculptures that Brecht admired. Brecht wanted to essentialize experience by carefully directing his viewer’s eye, without, perhaps, seeming to do so.

### Selective Abstraction

The second principle of focusing the audience’s attention is nearly inseparable from the first: that the carefully selected details to which Brecht draws attention are displayed against a ground of great sparseness. Conciseness and concentration are the signal virtues of Brecht’s poetry; and this is the same quality in theatrical terms: precisely realized details on a nearly blank stage. This principle has proved a major stumbling block for many American designers and directors of Brecht’s plays. For those who choose to find some route other than simple imitation of the Caspar Neher or Teo Otto designs, the invitation to use theatricalist techniques often provokes a blinding flurry of mad “creativity,” endless elaborations of simple ideas, sheer luxuriation in unnecessary invention. What these enthusiasts fail to realize is that Brecht’s technique is one of precisely calculated abstraction in which all unnecessary matters are expunged.

This is most clearly exercised in the design of the settings that Brecht



supervised and later glossed in his notes. He adored the sparseness of Neher's designs for *Mother Courage and Her Children*, for example: their functional quality of providing the actors with exactly the objects needed to carry out their theatrical tasks, but beyond that only the sketchiest indications of place and physical conditions. Rough screens and a flat stage floor were for Brecht instances of a beautiful aesthetic economy; he exulted in the refusal to fill in the empty spaces, preferring the fragmentary, suggestive, brisk look of a quick sketch.

The same sparseness is present in Brecht's distinctive control of stage movement. The movements of actors under Brecht's direction have been described as bold, purposeful, never random, never indecisive or hesitant, but ever organized, clear, and uncluttered. Clearly, Brecht's habit of working from Neher's sketches to create the "grouping" of actors created a continuity of technique from scenic design to *mise-en-scène*; but more important, Brecht and Neher shared an exclusive and spare compositional style that linked not only groupings to scenic design, but all the visual elements to the writing itself.

The same principle thus enters Brecht's writing in a number of ways. It is there in the conflation of time in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, when, with a narrator's help, a few minutes' pantomime enacts Grusche's night-long vigil over the child in the first act; or when, without any intrusive devices, a single unbroken conversation stretches from midwinter through the spring thaw in the shed at Lavrenti's farm. Perhaps most important, this radical selectivity affected Brecht's way of writing characters, for he did not write psychologized personalities, but instead cautionary figures whose psyches were dictated and shaped by their given social roles. Brecht politicized the self and expunged purely psychological motivations: there is no libidinous subtext, there are no hidden obsessions. Even when, in *The Tutor* (1950), Gustchen copulates with Lauffer as a substitute for her absent fiancé, the substitution is more or less conscious and excites no horror in the girl. Her motivations are not a Freudian tangle of unbidden urges; for Brecht, desire is concrete and unmysterious.

The real mystery that shapes Brecht's dramaturgy is not that of unconscious desires, but of irreconcilable roles, contradictory social pulls acting on a single character. Inner conflict comes from without. In accordance with Brecht's methods of abstraction, these conflicting needs are generalized, assumed, freed from biographical particularization: there is no point at which Mother Courage came to love her bastard brood, because her loyalty to them is a given; similarly, Shen Te's affection for her flier arrives at an appropriate point in the dramatic action and is not particularized—Brecht is not Marivaux. He was interested in the results of a generous impulse,



and typically drew attention away from that impulse's wellsprings or its character-bound idiosyncrasies. Brecht's characters are all to some degree ideational emblems; they are all stylized.

Just as designers are tempted to fill in the Brechtian blanks—those areas of the stage that he deliberately left in rough outline—actors will be tempted to fill in the characters' broadly outlined motivations with psychological additives that shift us onto the wrong sort of dramatic ground. Brecht put certain characters in masks for a reason—their roles were masks, simplified, essentialized, sharply defined theatrical beings that must be played by imaginative actors who can match the thrust and precision of the minor characters' incarnations (as well as those of the more specifically realized central characters), while still keeping the performance “clean,” or free of extraneous additions that only muddle the characterizations Brecht devised.

This means that actors and directors in his plays must be critical of their own impulses, able to select from their random impressions those elements that accord with what Brecht has given. He wanted richly detailed acting in his plays: he could wax rhapsodic over the minutiae of a good actor's performance, but those elements that he praised were all relevant to the Brechtian world—the bitten coin, the increasingly servile bow of a frustrated student out of work, the lust of a prostitute's protector—are all what Brecht called “social gests,” small, realistic actions that reveal the underlying social and economic relations of the characters involved. The psychological and the quaint are irrelevant here and are best excluded; beneath all its theatrical richness and subtlety, then, Brecht's is a rigorous aesthetic.

### The Principle of Visual Contrast

Brecht's dramaturgy is founded on carefully designed contradictions. He stated that explicitly in any number of his working notes. Here follow some of the ways that this ground of calculated contradictions found expression on Brecht's stage.

The clearest example of “contrast over time” is Brecht's immediate juxtaposition, between Scenes 6 and 7, of Mother Courage's “God damn the war!” with her fierce defense of that war (“Stop running down the war. I won't have it” [185, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 5 (1980)])—an opposition that clarifies this “merchant-mother's” contradictory roles and displays her moral discontinuity. By the starkness of the contrast, eliminating all gradation between her opposed positions, Brecht clarifies a striking incongruity that impels his audience toward a critical view of the character.

More common to Brecht's dramaturgy, and less obvious, were the more gradual reversals that shape his construction of scenes. Brecht described this principle—a fundamental structural principle for him—in his treatise *The*

*Messingkauf Dialogues* (1939-42):

Suppose you've a play where the first scene shows A bringing B to justice, then the process is reversed in the last scene and, after all kinds of incidents have been shown, B brings A to justice, so that there's one and the same process (bringing to justice) with A and B exchanging their respective roles (executioner and victim). In such a case you'll undoubtedly arrange the first scene so as to give the maximum possible effectiveness to the last. You'll ensure that on seeing the last scene the audience will immediately be reminded of the first; that the similarity will be striking; and at the same time that the differences will not be overlooked. (78-79)

It was this principle of writing that determined a naturally corresponding principle of staging: reversal of the *mise-en-scène* in the course of a scene, so that the final stage image altered and commented on the first. Thus the famous scene in *Life of Galileo* (1939) of the Pope, whose attitudes toward Galileo change with his social role—with the donning, that is, of his clerical robes. Like Saint Joan's change of costume after her confession in *The Trial of Joan of Arc at Rouen* (1952), the Pope's scene gives theatrical expression to a change of political roles and its accompanying attitudinal reversal. One man exits, and—both externally and internally—another enters, a transformation of the first.

These examples function within a single scene. Others function over a span of scenes as a progression in the plot and in the *mise-en-scène*. For example, the changes in Courage's financial status are linked to her choices of action; thus, the changing appearance of her wagon and wares and the decreasing number of her family and followers are calculated, theatrically expressed criticisms of her decisions. Shen Te's self-division into generous and selfish halves becomes a sequence of costume changes—a division that is echoed in a similar, but more gradually and realistically rendered, change in her lover, who begins as a careless but visionary pilot, only to become a vicious capitalist lackey.

The same principle can extend across whole plays from beginning to end. In this way, the final image of Mother Courage dragging her own wagon is made more outrageous and telling by our memory of her first entrance with three children and with her own greater youth and strength. Similar are the closing scenes in *Life of Galileo*, when Galileo's lifelong student leaves him to his food. Or the gods' unheeding exit at the end of *The Good Person of Setzuan* (1940), amid cries for help—the exact obverse of their richly anticipated arrival in the first scene. The concluding posture of *The Mother* (1932), with the titular character marching, flag in hand and part of

a revolutionary band, itself is strengthened by our memory of her initial appearance alone, homebound, and helpless. In each case the stage picture clarifies the single “ground-reversal” upon which Brecht structured every one of his mature plays.

Brecht loved stage settings simultaneously divided into two adjoining sections, or a “contrast across space”: he wrote them into *The Mother*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Life of Galileo*, either for the sake of allowing one half of the stage to comment on the other (as when Courage sings “The Wise Woman and the Soldier” to disrupt Eilif’s dance in the next tent), or else simply because he so enjoyed juxtaposition that he would put dissimilar things next to each other onstage simply for the sake of gratifying his own taste, no more—as in the wedding scene in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. But at his best, Brecht could combine this taste for laterally registered contrasts with an eye to clarifying the ideational contradictions in a scene.

Often he would make his points simply by movement and positioning, that is, by “blocking” patterns within the *mise-en-scène*: for example, in the scene outside the devastated village, Mother Courage’s acquiring a coat is visually contrasted to Katrin’s rescue of a baby; at the end of the scene, each raises her own booty into the air, and the audience is tacitly encouraged to compare the two kinds of acquisition. Later, during the “drum scene,” Katrin climbs a roof and risks her life to sound a warning of an impending attack to nearby villagers; on the opposite side of the stage, an old peasant woman, helplessly and unhelpfully, kneels and prays for the village’s deliverance.

Brecht had a way of using this lateral opposition to suggest moral opposites and temptations: there is scarcely a scene in *Life of Galileo* in which the representatives of Church and science do not position themselves on opposite sides of Galileo in order to sway him each to his or her own side. This is particularly true of the last scene between Andrea, Virginia, and Galileo, but works throughout the drama in an unusually direct way, almost as if Brecht were recalling the good and bad angels arguing with Faustus. Similarly, the playwright specified in his notes the meaning of a tableau in *The Tutor*: “It is here, at the university, that the young store up experiences, both on the intellectual and the physical plane. We see our man Fritz von Berg poised between sacred and profane lovers, between Patus and Bollwerk” (334, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 9 [1973]). When Courage loses Eilif, she is divided in space between a soldier, who tries to distract her, and Katrin, who tries to alert her to the danger. Courage’s choice, and her priorities, are thereby made into something physical, kinetic—both realistically credible and symbolic at a high level of abstraction.

This intellectual progression from the imagined reality of fictional

characters to the issues that their existence implies—what I have called Brechtian hermeneutics—is a journey through three realms of thought. Tacitly Brecht’s audience is addressed on three different levels: in terms of its own historical time and place, in terms of a fictional world (a different, conventionally given time and place), and in terms of an awareness of the issues that unite the fictional and contemporary worlds. In a theatrical realization, these three steps of an intellectual process become spaces on the stage, each keyed to a different mode in Brecht’s writing. Brecht’s theatrical practice and his dramaturgical techniques can thus be said to coalesce into a general pattern: the composite Brecht stage, an ideal division of theatrical space that theoretically houses the fullness of Brecht’s theatrical discourse by separating it into its constituent elements.

Of Brecht’s three realms of dramatic-cum-theatrical expression, we can begin with the one that Brecht’s drama shares with any other dramatic form: the fictional realm of depicted action, what Susanne K. Langer calls “virtual space” (102)—the principal stage space behind the proscenium arch, where actors represent characters, and the stage represents a place and time outside itself. What distinguishes Brecht’s treatment of the enacted events in this fictionalized space is his desire to endow them with a special, implicative significance. As noted above, Brecht organizes the fictional events through carefully planned juxtapositions in the *mise-en-scène*, and through stylistic heightening of selected details and the de-emphasizing of extraneous matters: he attempts in these more or less subtle ways to clarify patterns and significances within the dramatic action. He also has recourse to other ways of attacking the audience’s customary, possibly uncritical, ways of seeing.

Two other realms of thought are recruited by Brecht and physically attached to the action, so that the surrounding stage becomes a commentator on the conventional dramatic sphere. The first of these extensional realms is one that expressly mediates between the fictional world of the drama and the time and space occupied by the audience: it is a sphere of explanation and exhortation, a perlocutionary element in Brecht’s writing. In the texts, it is the realm of the prologues that are always addressed expressly to the audience and suggest an understanding of the play in terms of the audience’s own current concerns. In the theater, this is a space located just downstage of the famous half-curtain—a space literally between the fictional action and the audience, figuratively joining the same time and space as the audience itself.

It is the place for the prologue to *Antigone* (1948), which relates Sophocles’ story precisely to postwar Berlin’s situation; it is the realm of the scene-titles for *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), citing the precise events in German history that the “parable” was to illustrate by analogy. The prologue to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is similar in principle, explicitly connecting the ancient

myth that is about to be enacted to the problems of postwar reconstruction under socialist principles; and *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* and *The Tutor* both have verse prologues that delineate the present usefulness of their stories. The function of this realm is almost anti-imaginative, anti-fictional; if the relation between the fictional realm and the audience's circumstances is one of analogy (as it always is with Brecht), then the intervening realm of the prologue demystifies that analogy by explaining it.

Even when this element of Brecht's thought is not used in so blunt a way, the same impulse can be felt in his writing. This is the impulse to address contemporary concerns through scarcely concealed references in the fictional action and dialogue: for example, Galileo's attention-getting observations on the need to hide the truth while traveling through Germany, or the rather sentimental remarks he makes about the skeptical intelligence of the proletariat, are clearly directed to a particular audience's self-awareness. When Brecht's dialogue strains for this kind of undisguised relevance (in the middle of a fictionalized, "defamiliarized" action), it is language straining to break out into this downstage sphere of discourse, this direct mode of address.

The third realm of expression in Brecht's plays is the physical and tactical opposite of the prologues and similar references to the audience's immediate circumstances. This is the quintessentially Brechtian realm of obscured realities, of the invisible causes of the dramatic situation. If Brecht's direct address to the audience is comparatively crude, this third sphere is refined enough to be difficult to express in any concrete theatrical way. It is a sphere of implications, of what lies "behind" the enacted events—and its stage space is that of the backdrop or even the backstage upstage of the drop, literally "behind" the fictional action.

For this reason, it is fitting that the final chorus of soldiers that comes closest to stating the playwright's "message" in *Mother Courage and Her Children* is heard singing behind the scene. The enormous political forces that govern the action of *The Mother* are embodied in the huge, hovering political portraits projected on the backdrop and peering down at the fictional action. And the reality of *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* is shaped by a hermetically sealed bourgeois family situation that cannot tolerate the presence of the proletariat—so Brecht has a portrait of the family and friends, smiling and undisturbed, placed upstage to clarify the tensions that take over when the chauffeur Matti enters; the assumption of bourgeois hegemony is embodied on the backdrop, the better to be put into question by the contrasting tableau beneath it. The stage directions of *Life of Galileo* themselves suggest a frankly symbolic use of light—including a pair of astronomical projections on the backdrop that openly symbolize the allure and challenge of the truth and give a motif-bound unity to a long, complex dramatic action.

Even when it is not manifested as a literal backdrop, the same impulse to imply or to express in symbols the larger social issues “behind” the dramatic action can be detected. In one scene from *Life of Galileo*, when the conflict between the state and the new science is most clearly introduced, the formal cordialities of Galileo and the elder statesman are juxtaposed against the image of Galileo’s pupil and the young duke grappling and, in the process, breaking a Ptolemaic model of the universe: the symbolism could hardly be more obvious, but is effectively displayed, like the backdrop projections, as a simultaneous illustration of the underlying tension in the accompanying, lifelike scene.

This assemblage of impulses, which I am calling “The Composite Brecht Stage,” is another example of Brecht’s way of balancing an unblinkingly specific realism with calculated abstraction: the drama moves from direct audience-address in the most specific terms through a more or less realistically rendered story set in a more remote reality, and from there into a shadowy, symbolically rendered, incomplete and implicative sphere of inquiry—inquiry into implied causes, into the very assumptions of social life that must be addressed and changed. As one imaginatively moves away from the audience into the back reaches of the stage, one traverses fissures in Brecht’s language and rhetoric, moving from the almost importunately concrete to the teasingly unexpressed. Working in tandem, Brecht’s three modes of address form a complex, suggestive totality. They also create an unusually rich, original use of the stage’s opportunities for, and means of, expression.

### The Poetic Principle

I want to mention briefly here a matter that is extremely important in an appreciation of Brecht, but one that has been given only scattered attention. This is Brecht’s theatrical poetry, his poetry of the theater, in Francis Fergusson’s phrase (590 *et passim*), a poetry of theatrical elements and effects rather than words. Beyond the symbolic use of *mise-en-scène*, there are symbolic tropes and patterns of reference, some of which echo from one play to the next and reinforce each other’s meaning. There are, for example, the recurring images of the cross and crucifixion in *Mother Courage and Her Children*; the image returns in the flier’s scene in *The Good Person of Setzuan* and in the Christ imagery that surrounds the beaten and bloody Azdak in the final scene of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, giving Brecht access to received images of martyrdom, which he can then deploy in unexpected and partly ironic ways. In fact, Christian images abound in Brecht, not least in the holy-family echoes in the latter play and in its baptismal scene of Grusche’s washing and dressing the child; Brecht’s fascination with maternal instinct is thereby colored with a displaced religious reverence.



Not all these motifs can be said to have a precise denotation; some operate affectively and by intuition. There is, for example, the ominous motif of white faces, the origin of which (a suggestion by Karl Valentin) has been frequently repeated; it appears in Begbick's cosmetics in *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), in the faces of the soldiers in the prologue scenes of *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1943), in *Coriolanus* (1953), and elsewhere, as well as in Brecht's early poetry, where it is always associated with decay and death. Moreover, some of the symbols, or motifs, seem to change meaning from one play to another: milk and cheese are reminders of Galileo's unidealistic materiality, an aspect of his moral decline, yet the same products signify nurturing and protection in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*—a play that dwells much on recurring images of milk, blood, and water: a maternalized poetic vocabulary for a play about maternalism. *Life of Galileo*, too, claims its own symbolic tropes, appropriate to its subject: the sun and all other sources of light are used throughout as precise symbols of truth. Galileo's daughter—who at one point carries a shaded candle—faints at the sight of the sun when it is optically magnified and projected on a wall; and Galileo himself symbolically loses his capacity to see the light after his recantation.

One symbol that is put to exquisite use through intertextuality is that of snow. In *The Tutor*, it serves as an explicit sign of the desire to let problems be covered up, concealed, and left uncorrected—an image of vicious complacency. Always, snow has a threatening quality. It is a symbolic (as well as a physical) opponent to the hero in *The Good Soldier Schweik*, as is the wintry chill of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Only once does snow become an affirmative presence—at the moment in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when Grusche, having rescued the child and fully realized its importance to her, describes the world with the eyes of one who has become newly maternal, and entirely generous:

GRUSCHE (*looking around at Michael*). Never be afraid of the wind,  
it's only a poor devil like us. His job is pushing the clouds and  
he gets colder than anybody.

(*Snow begins to fall.*)

The snow isn't so bad either, Michael. Its job is covering the  
little fir trees so the winter won't kill them. And now I'll sing a  
song for you. Listen! (*Sings.*)

Your father is a bandit  
And your mother is a whore  
Every nobleman and honest  
Will bow as you pass  
The tiger's son will



Feed the little foals his brothers  
The child of the serpent  
Bring milk to the mothers. (177, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 7 [1971])

With this peculiar, unaccompanied song, Brecht shows a miracle beginning: imaginatively, Grusche's love transforms the world's evil into a momentary, idyllic vision, in a brilliantly composed and affecting image—made more powerful by its compression and by its subtle reference to related figures in other Brecht plays. In fact, a fuller understanding of Brecht's stage will demand that we see it as a fully symbolized sphere, in which any routine element may unexpectedly take on special meaning, such as Mother Courage's non-progress on the moving turntable floor, or Galileo's Pope exiting into darkness. Like Ibsen, Brecht moved from a boldly poeticized language in his early plays to an apparent realism that nevertheless functions as a transmogrified poetry, a seemingly conventional dramaturgy internally polarized by ideational schemes and complex revelations of an "inner" meaning. For Ibsen, a spiritual meaning is evoked, whereas for Brecht it is more a vision of concrete social facts, but each is reached through a subtle and complex theatrical poetry that has been too long ignored.

It would be wrong to claim that ignorance or violation of the above principles is the sole cause of our difficulties in staging Brecht. But insofar as these principles permit a clearer and more precise vision of the correspondences between Brecht's writing and directing, they may provide a basic understanding through which Brecht's directorial example can be put to better use. I would tell directors who want to undertake Brecht's plays to use these principles, to look for the significant patternings Brecht has put into the action: patterns of spatial juxtaposition and reversal of symbolic images across time, patterns of symbolic reference, patterns of shifting and complementary tones as the work moves from the explicit to the suggestive realms of Brecht's complex discourse. Always, I would advise a director to approach the work with playfulness and sensuality, while honoring a Brechtian tightness of focus.

But perhaps most important, I would encourage a director of Brecht to learn to say no—to make distinctions among the various elements of Brecht's *Modellbuch* legacies, to discover the difference between the decorative and the fundamental, the temporally bound solutions and the still powerful ones to the challenges of the dramatic texts. I would encourage clearing out everything that has grown customary in Brecht stagings and reaching for a new vision, but a vision strengthened by a firm understanding of the dramaturgic structures and strategies that must shape any vivid retelling of these plays.

Saying no is an aspect of any criticism, and it has operated somewhat tacitly in my own analysis. While sorting out these few essential principles of staging, I have deliberately ignored those principles or elements that I find inessential. Since this list of calculated omissions includes some of Brecht's most famous and most imitated habits, some of which are still seen as quintessentially Brechtian, I may be on controversial ground here. But every great director, Brecht included, has quirks that somehow prove lively in his hands but only secondhand in others'. Brecht was perhaps unusually liable to develop such idiosyncratic personal codes in his stagings: he had a decidedly eccentric visual taste (which colors every page of his diaries and nearly every other page of *Theaterarbeit*), and he loved to play with certain historically rooted theatrical devices and with the frisson of then-recent developments, like revolving stages and projections, or, arguably, the scene titles that he seemingly borrowed from silent movies.

Some of the qualities that I relegate to the status of "quirks" (or what a semiotician might call "idiolects") include: the exposed lighting instruments and scaffolding, the ungelled and unmodulated white light, the half-curtain, the revolving stage, the monochromatic color schemes, the generally utilitarian look, and the affectionately (one could almost say sentimentally) detailed attention to whatever routine labor the characters perform during their onstage action. Undoubtedly, each of these elements can be justified in terms of Brecht's themes and his desire for an earthy (proletarian) tone; certainly they have proven effective in Brecht's own hands (and in his theater, his culture, his historical moment).

But by now, all these devices have become the common clichés of mounting a Brecht classic, the calling cards of obedient acolytes, and a sure signal of a kind of sentimental unoriginality; they are almost unvaryingly used instead of deeper and more original insights. If Brecht is a living poet, something not unlike a living prophet, then these superficial stage dressings have become his whited—or dutifully grayed—sepulcher. What is needed is a new practice of staging Brecht that either replaces them or finds a way to render them fresh. For now, I would argue polemically to begin all new Brecht productions by violating one of these less essential stylistic rules. Why not Brecht with colored light, so long as it is used to illumine the play? Why not a masked Grusche and an unmasked, naturalistic Natella Abashwili, in a production that tacitly assumes the normalcy of Natella and the strangeness of Grusche's selflessness? Why not a circus-clown *Setzuan*, a *Mother Courage and Her Children* performed outdoors, or a brassy, brightly colored *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti*?

If Brecht is to be re-connected to contemporary theatrical practices and experiment, one element in his staging practice must necessarily be challenged,

although that challenge could disorient many of our most fundamental assumptions about Brechtian drama. That is the element of the lifelike itself: mimesis in acting, properties, and set—the limited, abstract mimesis around which Brecht organized his productions. There is a risk involved here, for Brecht’s naturalism is more than a superficial affectation; it is written into his language and is planned as a grounding element in his visual style. Brecht not only chose to include a dash of naturalism; he gave it a privileged position within his array of styles.

Consider the issue of characterization. Brecht’s characters are depicted in a range of abstraction from essentialized political types to detailed individuals whose conflicting social roles produce profound inner disorientation. In staging, Brecht actualized this range of abstraction by using a range of theatrical devices, including facial masks, extreme postures, and caricatured vocal patterns, on the one hand, for the more “essentialized” characters; and unadorned, precisely imitated naturalistic behavior, on the other, for his protagonists. Thus, he grounded his productions in a kind of histrionic naturalism, defining the central characters in lifelike performances so that the peripheral or emblematic (and usually antagonistic) characters displayed their difference through their stylistic distance from verisimilitude. Despite Brecht’s demonstrative discrediting of naturalism as a delimited theatrical idiom, it is still the natural, the lifelike, that grounds his performance style.

But surely such a dependence on verisimilitude is partly determined by theatrical history. It is important to remember that Brecht’s lifelikeness was a breakthrough in its time, a startling move into a recognizable reality in the face of the hysterical rantings of the Nazi theater. Later, the lifelike quality became the saving grace of Brecht’s work under the dicta of socialist realism. But now, in America for one place, the same resemblance to quotidian reality is the common assumption of our least challenging entertainments; Brecht’s subtle experimentation is thus absorbed into our customary ways of seeing. That is why, on American stages, Brecht tends to read as a somewhat mannered realist, and not much more.

But Brecht was not naïve. To an extent, he anticipated this problem. When, in the preface to *Roundheads and Peakheads* (1936), he made some very early stabs at defining his own staging style, his suspicion and encouragement of non-realistic impulses are revealed at the same time: he was interested in placing a phonograph onstage to accompany the songs in the play, but retreated from the idea for fear that it would “shock the audience unduly or give too much cause for amusement” (*Brecht on Theatre*, 103). A concern for his audience’s level of theatrical experience and flexibility thus imposed limits on his stylistic excursion. Perhaps the time has come to try the phonograph onstage without fear of disorienting the audience. In the age of rock concerts

and performance artists, the audience is less likely to laugh at a little visible musical equipment; in the age of Serban, Sellars, Ciulei, and Foreman, little that Brecht ever dreamed of would seem too unorthodox to try.

What would happen, then, if we were to jettison the lifelike, that one seemingly central element of Brechtian staging? After discarding the monochromatic color and lighting schemes, the revolving stage, and the peculiarities of Eisler's or Dessau's music, what might be the result if the naturalistic borrowings were discarded, too? None of the principles I have listed depend upon verisimilitude; in fact, they tend to defy it. What, then, if the defiance were taken further—if Grusche's internal conflicts were enacted by more than one actress at a time, or if Mother Courage's moments of "bargaining too long" were somehow reduced to a single, repeated gestural motif in a production that eschewed lifelike movement for choreographic extremity? What if Brecht's plays were theatrically reconceived as boldly as Shakespeare's, Chekhov's, Ibsen's, Calderón's, or Wagner's have been over the past few decades?

There is no guarantee of any sort of success in all this; I raise these questions fully aware of that. After all, Brecht wrote the naturalistic element into the plays painstakingly, and the loving care with which he did so is one of the signal traits of his achievement. But where there might be losses, there also might be significant gains: Brecht himself recognized and feared the danger of even seeming to belong to or resemble the realistic commercial theater. (That is why, in his final period, he put such stress on the "poetic" qualities of his work, as he did in his notes to *The Tutor*: for he feared that these qualities would be ignored, that his work would not stand out against the stultifying customs—and overwhelming presence—of conventional theater.) To divest these plays of their lifelike pretensions might forcibly awaken us to Brecht as a theatrical poet with a passionate and visionary consciousness, and unseat the somewhat mannered, socialist Zola that he has tended to become on American stages.

In the United States, there have already been some hints of this kind of liberating experiment. Having seen none of them, I can only surmise about how well they illuminated the plays (or, for that matter, whether they embodied any of the "first principles" I noted above). But they have been described vividly enough for one to sense in them the validity of passionate experiment. Productions like the Living Theater's *Antigone*, the San Francisco Mime Troupe's *Turandot* (1954), and Travis Preston's *Good Person of Setzuan* seem to have been thoughtful, poetic re-creations of Brecht's works. The presence of such stagings grants these plays their thinkability, their richness, their open appeal to the imagination; these stagings seek, in their irreverent way, to restore to Brecht his status as a poet of the theater, again a living and

surprising—rather than tiresomely familiar and predictable—presence on our stage.

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This handbook provides information on every aspect of the theatre up

to the end of 1982. Coverage is international in scope. Some articles deal with contemporary theatre in foreign countries, dramatic criticism, musical comedy, scenery, opera, Shakespearean Festivals, and blacks in the American theatre. All articles are signed. Separate sections in the back include a select list of theatre books, and notes on the illustrations.

*Oxford Dictionary of Plays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Plays* provides essential information on the 1000 best-known, best-loved, and most important plays in world theater. Each entry includes details of title, author, date of composition, date of first performance, genre, setting, and the composition of the cast, and more. A synopsis of the plot and a brief commentary, perhaps on the context of the play, or the reasons for its enduring popularity, follow. Around 80 of the most significant plays—from *The Oresteia* to *Waiting for Godot*—are dealt with in more detail. Genres covered include: burlesque, comedy, farce, historical drama, kabuki, masque, melodrama, morality play, mystery play, Noh, romantic comedy, tragicomedy, satire, and tragedy.

*Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Provides information about theatre and performance internationally, through history and in the present. The 4300 entries are complemented by over 100 illustrations. Coverage ranges from ancient Greek theatre to 21st century developments in London, Paris, New York, and around the globe. Pays special attention to non-Western styles through articles on theatre and performance throughout Asia and Africa, often written by practitioners or critics from those areas. Dance, opera, performance art, radio, film, and television are covered at length. Also embraces para-theatrical, non-dramatic, and popular performance, including ritual, carnivals, parades, the circus, and public executions. Biographical entries cover the lives and work of major figures from the past and present: actors, playwrights, directors, designers, and critics. Entries on cities and regions place performance in its local social and political context.

*Oxford Companion to American Theatre*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

A guide to the American stage from its beginnings to the present, the volume includes playwrights, plays, actors, directors, producers, songwriters, famous playhouses, dramatic movements, etc. The book covers classic works (such as *Death of a Salesman*) as well as many commercially successful plays (such as *Getting Gertie's Garter*), plus entries on foreign figures that have influenced dramatic development in the U.S. (from Shakespeare to Beckett and Pinter). New entries include relatively



recent plays such as *Angels in America* and *Six Degrees of Separation*, performers such as Eric Bogosian and Bill Irwin, playwrights like David Henry Hwang and Wendy Wasserstein, and relevant developments and issues including theatrical producing by Disney and the rise in solo performance.

Pfister, Manfred. *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*. 1988. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

*Play Index*. Bronx, New York: H. W. Wilson Co.

Index to more than 30,000 plays written from antiquity to the present and published from 1949 to the present; includes mysteries, pageants, plays in verse, puppet performances, radio and television plays, and classic drama.

Pritner, Cal, and Scott Walters. *Introduction to Play Analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

Reaske, Christopher R. *How to Analyze Drama*. 1966. New York: Monarch, 1984.

Rodriguez, Domingo. *Conceptual Thinking: A New Method of Play Analysis*. New York: World Audience, 2008.

Rush, David. *A Student Guide to Play Analysis*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Sanger, Keith. *The Language of Drama*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Scolnicov, Hanna, and Peter Holland. *Reading Plays: Interpretation and Reception*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Styan, J. L. *The Dramatic Experience: A Guide to the Reading of Plays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

*Theatre: A Book of Words*. Manchester, U.K.: Carcanet, 1993.

Defines approximately 1200 contemporary and historical theatrical terms. Bibliography included.

Thomas, James. *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Focal Press, 2009.

*20th Century Theatre*. 2 vols. New York: Facts on File, 1983.

This work is designed to offer an overview of theatre activity in North America and the British Isles since 1900, and to provide a “date-finder” for those who want information about a particular theatre event, production, personality or playhouse. Arrangement is chronological, beginning with 1900 and ending with 1979. Within each year, arrangement is by month

and covers theatre productions, American and British play premieres, revivals and repertoires, and births, deaths, and débuts. An author, title, subject index at the end of the volume helps to provide access to specific items. There is, in addition, an excellent bibliography of books about the theater.

Vena, Gary. *How to Read and Write about Drama*. New York: Arco, 1988.

Waxberg, Charles S. *The Actor's Script: Script Analysis for Performers*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998.

*Who's Who in Contemporary World Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Contains 1,400 brief biographical entries on theater artists—actors, directors, designers, dramatists—from 68 countries. Excludes those primarily working in dance and opera.

*World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, 6 vols. New York: Routledge, 1994-2000.

Beginning with 1945, surveys the range of national theatrical activity on a country-by-country basis from a specifically national standpoint. Each article covers a nation's theatrical history, artistic trends, structure of its theatre community, artistic profile, dance theatre, youth theatre, puppet theatre, theatre space and architecture, theatrical training, theatre criticism, scholarship and publishing. Bibliographies included. v. 1., Europe; v. 2., Americas; v. 3, Africa; v. 4, Arab World; v. 5, Asia; v. 6., Bibliography/Cumulative index.

*World Shakespeare Bibliography*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968-2003.

Published for the Folger Shakespeare Library. Electronic coverage as of June 3, 2003. When complete, it will provide annotated entries for all important books, articles, book reviews, dissertations, theatrical productions, reviews of productions, audiovisual materials, electronic media, and other scholarly and popular materials related to Shakespeare and published or produced since 1900.

## GLOSSARY OF DRAMATIC TERMS

**Act:** traditional segmentation of a play that indicates a change in time, action, or location, and helps to organize a play's dramatic structure. Plays may be composed of acts that, in turn, are composed of scenes.

**Action:** the physical activity or accomplishment of a character's intentions. Aristotle describes tragedy as "an imitation of an action," meaning that a character's choices are not simply narrated but acted out onstage. Moreover, a play as an "imitation of an action" means that the several events of the play together constitute one large human action; in this sense, action refers to the entire core of meaning of the events depicted onstage.

**Agon:** literally, a *contest*; an ancient Greek term used to denote the fundamental conflict in any drama.

**Allegory:** an extended metaphor in which characters, objects, and actions represent abstract concepts or principles in a drama that conveys a moral lesson. Allegorical plays were especially popular in medieval England.

**Anagnorisis:** the moment of recognition—of understanding, awareness, comprehension, or enlightenment—that is achieved when the main character discovers his true relationship to the incidents in the plot and to the other characters within it, that is, to what has occurred and why. This term was first described by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (330 B.C.).

**Antagonist:** the person or force that opposes the protagonist or main character in a play. The term derives from the Greek word meaning "opponent" or "rival."

**Antihero:** a protagonist or central character who lacks the qualities typically associated with heroism—for example, bravery, morality, or good looks—but still manages to earn sympathy from the spectator.

**Aside:** a theatrical convention (commonly used in drama prior to the nineteenth century but less often afterwards) in which a character, unnoticed

and unheard by the other characters onstage, speaks frankly to the audience.

**Blank verse:** the verse form most like everyday speech; in English, unrhymed iambic pentameter. This is the form in which the great majority of English verse plays, including Shakespeare's, are written.

**Burlesque:** a satirical play with a strong element of parody (especially of a work by the author's rival). Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779) and Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) are examples of this type. In late-nineteenth-century America, burlesques incorporating music and elements of fantasy became a popular medium for vaudeville or variety shows featuring bawdy sexual humor.

**Catalyst:** a character whose function in a play is to introduce a change or disruption into a stable situation and, thus, to initiate the action of the play; the catalyst is often involved in the drama's inciting incident.

**Catastasis:** Greek word for the crisis or turning point—the height of the action—in a play.

**Catharsis:** the emotional release or sense of relief a spectator may feel at the end of a tragedy. In the *Poetics* (330 B.C.), Aristotle posits that the proper aim of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear and effectively rid the body of these feelings, and *catharsis* is the term he uses to describe this purging of emotions.

**Character:** the word for a person in a play and the word for the qualities of mind and spirit which constitute that person. In drama, actors must demonstrate character through *mimesis* or imitation rather than narration.

**Climactic plot:** a plot that has one or more of the following characteristics: begins late in the story, toward the very end of climax; covers a short space of time, perhaps a few hours, or at most a few days; contains a few solid, extended scenes, such as three acts with each act comprising one long scene; occurs in a restricted locale, one room or one house; contains a limited number of characters, usually no more than six to eight; is linear and moves in a single line with few, if any, subplots or counterplots; proceeds in a cause-and-effect chain, with its characters linked in a sequence of logical, almost inevitable development. Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) both incorporate climactic plots.

**Climax:** The moment when the root conflict of the play is resolved. At this moment the root action ceases. The climax is the final, culminating event in the dramatic action, the moment toward which the action of the play has been pointing or moving. The statement of the climax must be narrowed to

a single incident, usually the high dramatic moment of the script. After this moment there may be clarification, but there is no more conflict.

**Comedy:** from the Greek word *komos*, meaning “band of revelers,” comedy is a form of drama that is distinguished by humorous content and endings that are, on balance, “happy” ones. Most comedies attempt to highlight or satirize absurdities of their society’s norms and values. Comedy is concerned with human beings in their social capacity and is therefore heavily dependent on codes of conduct, manners, and morality, which it uses to express or imply a standard against which deviations are measured.

**Comedy of manners:** a form of comedy that satirizes the foibles of the upper class and the aristocracy by means of witty dialogue and the ridicule of artificial social decorum. The form originated in the late seventeenth century in England, during the Restoration, in the works of William Wycherley, William Congreve, and others.

**Commedia dell’arte:** literally “comedy of professional players” in Italian. A genre of Italian theater that emerged at the end of the sixteenth century, continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and, from there, spread its influence throughout Europe. Performance relied on the portrayal of stock characters—some of which were derived from Roman comic types—and the improvisation of action and dialogue around a basic (but well-known) plot outline.

**Complication:** any new element that changes the direction of the dramatic action; “discovery” is the substance of most complications.

**Confidant(e):** a character in whom the principal character confides, such as Horatio in *Hamlet*.

**Conflict:** the central problem in the plot, the obstacle hindering a character from getting what he or she wants. Often, the diverging interests of the protagonist and antagonist create conflict. The rise and fall of conflict is often said to be the indispensable element of any play.

**Crisis:** Term used in discussion of play structure to designate the point at which the complications of the plot come to a head and, thenceforth, determine the direction of the rest of the play; synonymous with “turning point” or “peripeteia.”

**Cyclical plot:** a plot in which the play ends in much the same way it began, rendering the action of the play more or less static or futile for the characters involved, who remain essentially unchanged. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) has a cyclical or circular plot.

**Decorum:** literally, *that which is fitting*; applied to action and events thought to be in harmony with the spirit of the play and with conventions governing character presentation—for instance, lofty poetry for noblemen and prose for rustics and common people in Elizabethan drama.

**Dénouement:** Literally, the *untying* (synonymous with the “catastrophe,” which itself mean “downturn” or “overturning”) in a play, the point in which the loose ends or mysteries of a plot are tied up or revealed. The dénouement usually comes with, or shortly after, the climax.

**Deus ex machina:** literally, “a god emerging from a machine” (Latin). The crane used for special effects in fifth-century Greek theater would suspend an actor in midair and propel him over the playing space. Dramatists, especially Euripides, often utilized the device to introduce a god who would appear at the end of the play and miraculously resolve the plot. The term is used in contemporary criticism to describe a sudden and contrived or arbitrary resolution of a difficult situation.

**Dialogue:** language spoken by the characters in a play, normally in exchange with each other. Dialogue differs from narration because it is delivered in the first person and seeks to imitate human interaction and convey the artistic purpose of the playwright.

**Diction:** the language of a play; one of the six elements that Aristotle listed as essential to the drama.

**Domestic tragedy:** a form of drama, popularized at the start of the eighteenth century in England, that deals with the fortunes of middle-class or mercantile characters rather than the upper class or aristocracy, which had been the traditional focus of tragedy.

**Dramatic irony:** the irony produced when the audience is aware of something that a character or characters in the play do not yet know. It is frequently used to heighten tension or suspense, or to increase our sympathy and understanding.

**Dramatis personae:** literally, “people in the drama” (Latin). A character list identifying important characters in the play and their relationships, intended to help the reader or spectator understand the actions and interactions occurring onstage.

**Dramaturg:** a theatrical professional involved in the development and revival of plays. Dramaturgs are trained in dramatic theory, theater practice, and the history of drama and are thereby equipped to serve in a number of artistic capacities: as a sounding board for directorial concepts, as an extra set of eyes in the rehearsal room, and as a production researcher.



**Epic Theater:** Bertolt Brecht's model theater intended to serve as an alternative to Aristotelian theater with its emphasis on continuous plot and tight construction. The Epic Theater addresses human reason rather than feeling, thus discouraging passivity, so that the spectator leaves the theater with a sense that the current social order is alterable and that action is necessary. In this theater, political action takes precedence over aesthetic wonder. The term *estrangement* (or *alienation*) *effect*—*Verfremdungseffekt* in German—refers to an important technique employed by Epic Theater practitioners because it places responsibility on the audience to observe, rather than identify with, the characters. Onstage events are performed in an unfamiliar or unexpected manner, thereby provoking responses of surprise or curiosity on the audience's part and prompting a desire to effect change.

**Epilogue:** a concluding address by an actor or group of actors that is directed toward the audience and sums up the play's action; also an additional scene, following the resolution of a play, intended to comment on the preceding events and offer a final perspective on the part of the dramatist.

**Episodic plot:** a plot that has one or more of the following characteristics: begins relatively early in the story and moves through a series of episodes; covers a long period of time: weeks, months, and sometimes many years; contains many short, fragmented scenes and sometimes an alternation of short and long scenes; may range over an entire city or even several countries; contains a profusion of characters, sometimes several dozen; frequently marked by several threads of action, such as two parallel plots, or scenes of comic relief in a serious play; contains scenes that are juxtaposed to another, and in which an event may result from several causes or emerge from a network or web of circumstances. Shakespeare's plays generally incorporate episodic plots.

**Exposition:** information, often delivered near the beginning of a play, that reveals something essential for the audience's understanding of the world of the play or the story's given circumstances, as well as the basic relationships between characters and events that have taken place offstage or earlier.

**Expressionism:** a literary and theatrical movement that originated in Europe just before the twentieth century but flourished from 1910 to 1925. Spurred by the overwhelming social and political upheaval of World War I, expressionist dramatists strove to emphasize the moral crisis of the modern, industrial world dominated by machines and masses of people. In expressionist plays the characters are often nameless and defined solely by their occupations; use primal gesture (exaggerated, emotive movement); speak stylized dialogue that emphasizes certain words or expressions; and inhabit a theatrical world that

includes exaggerated or distorted, macabre or dreamlike, images. In this way, expressionist drama seeks to project onto the stage the emotional perspective or state of mind of the protagonist.

**Falling action:** term used in discussion of dramatic structure to indicate the period in the play after the crisis or turning point has been reached, in which the complications of the rising action are untangled and the action moves to its destined end.

**Farce:** a genre of fast-paced comedy characterized by rapid stage action, a series of misunderstandings in an otherwise highly improbable plot, ludicrous characterizations, and abundant physical humor.

**Foil:** a character whose qualities or traits highlight those of another. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), for instance, Laertes serves as a foil to Hamlet because both are put in the position of avenging a murdered father.

**Fourth wall:** theatrical term applied to the realist stage, where actors no longer played directly to the audience but instead focused on each other. In nineteenth-century England, the convention became increasingly popular and stage sets were designed to replicate a traditional room with three walls, the "fourth wall" (that is, the proscenium arch, or front of the stage) being open for observation of the action by the audience.

**Hamartia:** the Greek term used by Aristotle to describe a character's intellectual error, mistaken assumption, or internal division that prompts the tragic outcome of his or her actions. Often described as the "tragic flaw" or self-destructive force that triggers the downfall of the hero or heroine.

**High comedy:** comedy that achieves its effect from the depiction of character and the use of language rather than through physical devices; its appeal is therefore primarily to the intellect.

**Hubris:** the tragic flaw of pride, arrogance, over-confidence, or willful ignorance that can lead a hero to disregard accepted moral codes or warnings from the gods, prompting his or her own downfall.

**Humours comedy:** popularized by Ben Jonson in England in the early seventeenth century, this genre of comedy drew upon the classical medical theory that an individual's temperament or psychological disposition was determined by the balance (or imbalance) of four bodily fluids (known as "humours"): black bile, phlegm, blood, and choler or yellow bile. Characters in humors comedies are motivated by their predominant humors.

**Inciting incident:** the "disturbance" that initiates the conflict-resolution process of the play. The inciting incident launches the root action of the

drama. It is not necessarily the first action of the play, nor need it be the first event of a broad conflict that may have existed before the dramatic action begins. Rather, the inciting incident is the event of the play that puts the forces of conflict in motion.

**Linear plot:** a traditional plot sequence in which the incidents in the drama progress chronologically; that is, all of the events build upon one another and there are no jumps, for example, from the present to the past. The Greeks and neoclassicists adopted this structure as the template for creating effective tragedy. See “climactic plot.”

**Low comedy:** as opposed to high comedy, low comedy gains its effect, which is usually hearty laughter, from the use of slapstick and broad comic devices instead of character and dialogue.

**Major Dramatic Question:** The question the play exists to answer; the major dramatic question may change as the play progresses. Often phrasing the dramatic question will illuminate the play in such a way that the root conflict and root action emerge clearly. In *Oedipus Tyrannos* (430 B.C.) the major dramatic question might be as follows: Will Oedipus discover the murderer of Laius, as directed by the gods, and lift the plague from Thebes?

**Melodrama:** a serious play that does not attain the heights of tragedy or have the same purpose as comedy; originally, a drama in which music is used to heighten emotion (the Greek *melos* means “song”). As it was popularized during the nineteenth century in France, Britain, and the United States, this genre grew to be characterized by stories of adventure and intrigue calculated to provoke audiences’ heightened emotional response. Melodrama offers sensational plots (rather than subtle ideas or character development) that exaggerate the moral qualities of good and evil, focus on outer struggle (rather than the inner struggle of tragedy), and emphasize virtue triumphant.

**Monologue:** a long speech or narrative spoken by one character. A monologue can be addressed to another character onstage, spoken to oneself, or shared with the audience as a means of elucidating a character’s internal thoughts or desires that cannot be expressed in formal dialogue. A soliloquy is a form of monologue, and an aside, if lengthy, can be characterized as a monologue.

**Naturalism:** a literary and theatrical movement that thrived in the late nineteenth century in reaction against earlier styles and as an attempt to reproduce life as exactly as possible: truthfully, objectively, and with scientific accuracy. In naturalism, which is often associated with philosophical determinism, the physiological disposition of a character is the focus of the drama and heredity or physical environment dictates his or her fate. In

literature, naturalism is considered an extreme form of realism, one that concentrates on exhibiting causes and effects (especially among the lower classes) and upon depressing, unadorned social situations. The concept of naturalism can also be applied to the way in which a play is staged: for example, a naturalist set may incorporate a real working fireplace or a faucet with running water.

**Neoclassicism:** a seventeenth-century movement (especially in France and England), prompted by a renewed interest in the writings of Aristotle and other classical theorists, that lasted well into the eighteenth century.

**Peripeteia (peripety):** Greek word meaning a “reversal of circumstances”; applied to the point in the plot where the action undergoes a lasting reversal, or change in direction—i.e., where, it is clear, the hero’s fortunes are or will be changed. See “crisis” or “turning point.”

**Plot:** the interlocking arrangement of incidents in a play that propels a drama forward from conflict to resolution; this is an arrangement designed to show not only sequence but also cause and effect. Plots may be simple or complex, and any single play may have more than one plot (and plays from experimental, avant-garde, or postmodern traditions may calculatedly eschew plot altogether).

**Point of attack:** the point in the story at which the playwright has chosen to begin the action of his play; can be late or early; if the point of attack is late, the play’s action has a long past that is not depicted onstage.

**Problem play:** a late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century form of drama that addressed social issues, such as class, workers’ rights, women’s rights, etc. The early dramas of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw are examples of problem plays, sometimes called social-problem plays or examples of the “play of ideas.”

**Prologue:** literally, a “speech before,” or monologue by an actor introducing the action of the play; in some plays, the opening scene in which information is revealed about events that occurred prior to the play’s start.

**Proscenium arch:** the picture frame formed by the side and top walls of the modern stage, which provide the opening through which the audience sees the stage. See “fourth wall.”

**Protagonist:** the hero or central character in a play, who is the main focus of the audience’s attention. Derived from the ancient Greek term *protagonistes*, meaning “first contestant” or “leading actor.” In traditional drama, the protagonist often engages in conflicts with an antagonist.

**Realism:** a literary and theatrical style that seeks to depict life as it really is without artifice, or without violation of conventional appearances and probability. The origins of realism can be traced to late-nineteenth-century Europe, when playwrights and theater practitioners sought to move away from traditional, often melodramatic, plays and productions so as to create drama that portrayed real people confronted with plausible situations. The most common setting for realistic drama, as well as its most common subject, is middle-class life; among the playwrights associated with the rise of realism are Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw.

**Repertory:** a set of plays; a repertory acting company will perform a series of plays, previously prepared for performance, in rotation, alternating productions in a given theatrical space during a specific period of time.

**Resolution:** the concluding event, or series of events, that resolves the fundamental conflict that had sustained the play's main action. A resolution can also be a *dénouement*.

**Revenge tragedy:** a form of sensational tragedy revolving around stories of murder and revenge for the death of a relative, with much intrigue, madness, and mayhem thrown into the mix. The genre flourished in England during the reigns of Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) and James I (r. 1603-25). Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) are among the best-known revenge tragedies.

**Rising action:** the portion of a play's structure, in its first half, in which events complicate the situation that existed at the beginning of a play, thereby intensifying the conflict, or introducing new conflict, and leading to the drama's crisis or turning point.

**Romanticism:** a literary and artistic movement that began in England and Germany in the late eighteenth century, continued into the early nineteenth, and emphasized imagination and emotion over the neoclassical ideals of intellect and reason. Largely influenced by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), Romantic literature generally reflects a belief in the innate goodness of man in his natural state. The early dramas of the Germans Goethe (*Götz von Berlichingen*, 1773) and Schiller (*The Robbers*, 1781) are examples

**Root Conflict:** The basic conflict of the play that underlies and motivates the main action. The root conflict identifies the main competing forces in the drama, and these forces almost always center in characters. The protagonist (usually the central character) is named first and the antagonist second. The root conflict of *Hamlet* might be described, then, as Hamlet versus Claudius.

**Root Action:** The process by which the root conflict of the play is resolved. A statement of the root action tells us not only who the competing forces or agents are, but also how the conflict is resolved. If the root conflict of *Oedipus Tyrannos* (430 B.C.) is Oedipus versus the gods, then the root action might be the following: Oedipus wrests the secret to the lifting of the plague from the gods, only to find in such a victory his own destruction. The statement of the root action distills the play into one sentence that isolates the “power source” of the dramatic event.

**Scene:** the traditional segmentation of a play’s structure to indicate a change in time or location, to jump from one subplot to another, to introduce new characters, or to rearrange the actors on the stage. Traditionally plays are composed of acts, which are then broken down into scenes. In the French tradition as practiced by Molière and Racine, a new scene begins whenever a character enters or exits the stage.

**Scène-à-faire:** literally, “scene that must be done” (French) or the “obligatory scene”; any scene of a play that the audience has been led to expect as inevitable and that comprises the end of a well-made play.

**Sentimental comedy (comédie larmoyante or “weeping comedy”):** a genre of comedy popularized in eighteenth-century England that departed from the bawdy and titillating themes of Restoration comedy (1660-1710) and emphasized instead the simple and innate goodness of humankind. Interest in the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) and other philosophers fueled the assumption that people could be saved from vice if instructed to follow their natural instincts. Like domestic tragedy, sentimental comedy (which often was not truly comic) centered on and appealed to the middle class, inviting sentimental reflections from its audience on bravery, youth, motherhood, etc.

**Set:** the design, decoration, and scenery of the stage during a play, usually meant to represent the location or locations in the drama. Plays may have a single set or several sets.

**Setting:** the time and location in which a play takes place. A play can have multiple settings and incorporate more than one time period, as well.

**Slapstick:** originally, a wooden sword worn by the *commedia dell’arte* character Harlequin that figured prominently in his comedic routine; the sword was a two-piece stick that made a tremendous noise when it struck another character. As a subgenre, slapstick is a form of physical comedy often characterized by farcical situations, sudden falls, crude jokes, slaps in the face, and generally reckless behavior.



**Soliloquy:** a monologue uttered by a character alone onstage that provides insight into his or her thoughts. This theatrical convention is common in plays from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century and is generally associated with Shakespeare's works. The device was discarded by modern dramatists, such as August Strindberg, who were concerned with creating realistic depictions on stage.

**Spectacle:** generally, the elements in a play's production that appeal to the *visual* theatricality of the piece, such as costumes, scenery, props, or stage tricks. Described in Aristotle's *Poetics* (330 B.C.) as the sixth element of tragedy (after plot, character, thought, diction, and song).

**Stage directions:** in the text of a play, directions or actions indicated by the playwright that describe the physical movements or emotional responses of the characters onstage. Stage directions may also note the setting, as well as the physical appearance of the characters and their relationships with one another.

**Stichomythia:** dialogue in Greek drama, in which the characters alternately speak single lines of verse, one line to each, with great speed and emphasis. Similar to, but more formalized than, repartee.

**Subplot:** a secondary plot that usually shares a relationship with the main plot, either thematically, in terms of the action itself, or both. The subplot often deals with the secondary characters in the play. Sometimes called "parallel plot," "double plot," or "underplot."

**Subtext:** Konstantin Stanislavsky's term for unspoken text; for an actor, the internal motivations or responses never explicitly stated in the dialogue, but understood either by the audience or the characters themselves. The dramatist creates subtext to underscore the emotional or intellectual truth of a character's life that is unspoken but implied.

**Theatricalism:** a broad term for a number of non-realistic styles; it is usually applied when great reliance is placed in production on a non-realistic stage design and an equally non-realistic use of lighting and sound.

**Theme:** the idea, concept, or argument that a playwright wishes to express in a play. Aristotle listed "thought," or theme—taken to refer to intellectual content or meaning—as one of the six elements essential to the drama

**Tragedy:** a form of drama that arose in ancient Greek culture; a play dealing with a serious subject in an elevated style and ending in catastrophe and death. Though the mode and structure of tragedy have varied over the centuries to reflect the cultural beliefs and conventions of each age, the central dramatic conflict remains constant: the human being struggles to overcome some

antagonistic force and is ultimately defeated. In classical Greek tragedy, the protagonist is a man of political or social stature and the gods play a role in the reversal of his fortune from good to bad. In modern drama, tragedies often reflect the struggle of middle-class citizens to overcome societal restraints or their own private domestic conflicts.

**Tragicomedy:** the term used to describe a drama that incorporates both tragic and comic elements. This hybrid form was popularized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in such works as Giovanni Battista Guarini's pastoral play *The Faithful Shepherd* (1590) and the dramatic collaborations of Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625). Plays written in this mode often featured tragic conflicts that resolve happily through unexpected—sometimes improbable—plot twists. The term *tragicomedy* has also been applied to modern and contemporary plays that do not fit the traditional categories of tragedy and comedy, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), subtitled “a tragicomedy in two acts.”

**Turning point:** the point where a decisive change in the action occurs and the ending of the play becomes predictable or foreseeable if not inevitable. See “crisis” or “peripeteia.”

**Unities:** the principles of dramatic structure, derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* (330 B.C.), that require a plot's action to be singular (no subplots), to complete itself within a twenty-four hour period, and to take place in one location. Aristotle mentioned only the unities of action and time, but French neoclassical theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries added place and made the unities a so-called rule of drama.

**Vaudeville:** an entertainment popular in the United States in the first third of the twentieth century. It consisted of singing, dancing, and comedy in individual sketches with no plot or connecting thread.

**Well-made play:** also called *pièce bien-faite* (French), a play that relies heavily on the orchestration of highly complicated plots rather than characterization or themes. The genre dominated French theater for much of the nineteenth century; its playwrights (Scribe, Sardou) sought to integrate conventions such as overheard conversations, mistaken identities, and sudden appearances and disappearances to create suspense and intrigue. The plays conclude with a *scène à faire*, or the final confrontation of characters that resolves the play's action.

## STUDY GUIDES

### 1. The Parts of Drama (after Aristotle)

I. **Plot:** the overall structure of the play, or the story and method through which its dramatic action is organized.

A. Beginning:

1. exposition
2. inciting incident
3. major dramatic question

B. Middle:

1. complication
2. turning point

C. End:

1. reversal and recognition (understanding, awareness, or comprehension on the part of the main character of what has occurred during the play and why)
2. climax
3. resolution or dénouement

II. **Character:** the primary material from which plots are created.

A. Levels of characterization (the playwright's primary means of differentiating one character from another):

1. physical
2. social
3. psychological (the most essential)
4. moral: moral choices or decisions differentiate characters more fully than any other type, since such decisions cause

characters to examine their motives, in the process of which their true natures are revealed both to themselves and to the reader or spectator.

B. Methods for revelation of character:

1. descriptions in the stage directions
2. preface or other explanatory material that is not part of the dialogue
3. what the character says
4. what others say about the character
5. what the character does (the most important)

C. Range of character:

1. typified-----individualized
2. sympathetic-----unsympathetic

III. **Thought:** present in all plays, even the most light-hearted farce; a playwright cannot avoid expressing some ideas, since events and characterization always imply some view of human behavior.

A. Themes, ideas, arguments, and overall meaning of the action:

Meaning in drama is usually *implied*, rather than stated directly. It is suggested by the relationships among the characters; the ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters; the conflicts and their resolution; and such devices as spectacle, music, and song. Sometimes the author's intention is clearly stated in the script, as when "mouthpiece" or *raisonneur* characters advocate a certain line of action, point of view, or specific social reform.

B. Devices to project ideas, apart from the implications of action and dialogue:

1. chorus (a form of direct statement)
2. soliloquies and asides (forms of direct statement)
3. allegory
4. symbol

IV. **Diction:** language, the playwright's primary means of expression.

A. Purposes of language:

1. to impart information
2. to characterize
3. to direct attention to important plot elements

4. to reveal the themes and ideas of the play
  5. to establish tone or mood and level of probability (that is, logical or internal consistency)
  6. to establish tempo and rhythm
- B. Language or diction is selected, arranged, and heightened by the playwright, even in the most realistic or naturalistic of dramas.
- C. Language or diction should be appropriate to the characters, the situation, the level of probability, and the type of play.

V. **Music:** all the musical, lyrical, or aural elements of a play-in-production.

A. Types:

1. sound of the actors' voices
2. incidental songs and background music
3. song and instrumental accompaniment (e.g., as in musical comedy and opera)
4. sound effects

B. Functions:

1. establishes mood
2. characterizes
3. suggests ideas
4. compresses characterization or exposition (by presenting information, feelings, or motivations in a song)
5. lends variety
6. is pleasurable in itself

VI. **Spectacle:** all the visual elements of a play-in-production; they should be appropriate and distinctive.

A. Movement and the spatial relations of characters

B. Design of the lighting, settings, and costumes (including properties)

## 2. Table of Contrasts: Theater and Film

### *Characteristics of Theater*

1. A three-dimensional, ephemeral performance of events.
2. Continuous, "big" acting aimed at a live audience; does not employ amateur actors.

3. Immediate relationship between the actors and the audience, both of whom are physically present in the same space at the same time.
4. Except in rare cases, has no narrator.
5. Relatively active audience that must choose for itself where to look or what to see; what the audience sees is unmediated by a camera.
6. A verbal art primarily, but it also has a visual component (through costumes, sets, lights, choreography, and action itself).
7. A collaborative art, with the actor finally in control on the stage.
8. A total work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but not quite to the extent that film is.
9. Irreducible: to have theater, you must have living actors performing before a real audience in a more or less demarcated space.
10. A group experience, as it occurs in theatrical auditorium of one kind or another.
11. The most popular art form of the nineteenth century and before.
12. Its essence consists of human beings in conflict with each other or themselves.
13. The conjunction belonging to the theater is “therefore” rather than “then”; in other words, the theater gives primacy to causality more than it does to succession.
14. Deals with the relationship between people.
15. There is only one “shot”: the full picture of the stage.
16. Intermissions are common, and scene changes (as well as costume, make-up, and lighting changes) can be slow and laborious. Space is therefore less manipulable and time is less flexible.
17. The dramatic text is an independent artwork that can be read *or* performed.
18. Usually dramatizes the *consequences* of action; characters are often victims of their pasts.

### *Characteristics of Film*

1. A two-dimensional, permanent visual record of a performance.
2. Discontinuous, “smaller” acting aimed at the camera lens; can employ amateur actors.
3. No immediate or physical interrelationship between the actors and the audience.
4. Has a narrator: the camera.



5. Relatively passive audience for whom the camera chooses what will be seen.
6. A visual art primarily, but also a dramatic art that enacts stories (with words once the sound era begins) and a narrative art that tells those stories through the mediation of the camera.
7. A collaborative art, with the director ultimately in control.
8. A total work of art, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*.
9. Reducible to DVD, video, television, etc.
10. Can be a solitary experience, especially if you are watching a film alone at home.
11. The most popular art form of the twentieth century and beyond.
12. Can dispense with overt conflicts, climaxes, and even plots; indeed, can be almost completely non-theatrical or -dramatic.
13. The particle belonging to the cinema is “then” rather than “therefore”; in other words, the cinema gives primacy to succession more than it does to causality.
14. Deals with the relationship of people not only to other people, but also to things and places.
15. The camera can provide the viewer with multiple visual perspectives, through different shots.
16. Intermissions are rare, and scenes changes (as well as costume, make-up, and lighting changes) are accomplished swiftly and easily through cuts or editing. Space is therefore manipulable and time is flexible.
17. The film script is not an independent artwork and cannot be read by itself fruitfully, nor can its words be “performed” as a play’s words could be; a screenplay is a preparatory sketch for a future art work, a fully realized cinematic experience.
18. Usually concentrates on action *per se*, even when this action is “interior” or psychological; characters are often makers of their own destinies in the present.

### 3. Table of Contrasts: Tragedy, Comedy, and Farce

Tragedy tends to exalt man as an individual, by exploring his place in a world inhabited by fateful forces, and by showing how important he can be in the face of insuperable odds. Comedy tends to see man as a social animal, and to belittle his dignity by making him one of the crowd. Tragedy tends to punish man with a punishment out of all proportion to his sin, but only for

making us feel that he is being crucified for sins that are ours too. Comedy gently mocks man for his ultimate unimportance, but only after we have shared a little of his humiliation. Tragedy encourages us to be passionate; comedy usually seeks to bring the intellect into play. Life, it can therefore be said, is a comedy to the man who thinks, and a tragedy to the man who feels.

The simple logic of traditional comedy and the coherence of tragic feeling have on the whole been rejected by 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century art. Tragedy depends on a confidence in the extraordinary capabilities and resilience of man; comedy depends on a confidence in the reason and resilience of the social order. But the frequent appearance of tragicomedy in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries suggests that our moral and social values are uncertain and shifting. Moreover, artists frequently believe that it is too difficult to depict the suffering and cataclysm of these centuries with unrelieved seriousness, and that it would be somewhat irresponsible to impose a wholly comic vision on such a world. Such absolute and disparate forms often do not seem relevant to artists, who regard tragicomedy as the more realistic and relevant form.

### Oppositions between Tragedy and Comedy

<i>Tragedy</i>	<i>Comedy</i>
Individual	Society
Metaphysical	Social
Death	Endurance
Error	Folly
Suffering	Joy
Pain	Pleasure
Sacrificial	Procreative
Isolation	(Re)union
Terror	Euphoria
Unhappiness	Happiness
Irremediable	Remediable
Decay	Growth
Destruction	Continuation
Defeat	Survival
Extremes	Moderation
Inflexible	Flexible
Exceptionality	Commonality
Cathartic & enervating (tears)	Life-giving & renewing (laughter)

## Characteristics of Farce

1. In farce, there is an emphasis on plot.
2. Farce is physical or “low” comedy.
3. Farce is comedy of situation as opposed to character.
4. Farcical characters are almost never aware that they are funny, unlike some characters in “high” comedy.
5. In farce, action replaces thought; where real-life characters think, farcical characters use instinct, as they are in the thick of things and do not have time to think.
6. In farce, single-minded characters pursue an endeavor fervently; they have short-range goals and want immediate gratification.
7. The stakes are high in farce; characters often find themselves in life-and-death situations (frequently over trifles), but there are rarely consequences. That is, no one gets hurt and everything turns out all right.
8. Action leads to objects in farce, and objects are always defeating the characters.
9. The pace in a theatrical production of farce should be very fast, for one must not give audience members time to question the reality or probability of what they are seeing onstage.
10. In farce, characters are dehumanized and humans are presented as unthinking machines. Farcical plays themselves, with their fast-paced and intricately connected plots, are like well-oiled machines.
11. In farce, unlikely or even impossible situations are made to seem totally probable.

## 4. Table of Contrasts: Realism and Naturalism

### *Realism*

1. Realistic plays treat middle-class life and feature educated, articulate characters.
2. Drama is a conflict of wills in which human beings make conscious decisions and face the consequences of their actions. Realism tends to oversimplify motivation, having characters act out of a single motive or only out of conscious (as opposed to unconscious) motives.

3. Realism adapts the well-made play to the “problem play” or play of ideas.
4. In realistic drama, heredity and environment are important in the development of character, but so too is the character’s conscious will to oppose and transcend them.
5. Realism’s viewpoint is ameliorative and humanistic; realism nourishes the hope that human beings possess the reason and will to improve their condition.
6. In a realistic play, humans are depicted as dignified, special beings seeking to control their own fates, apart from any belief in God or a higher spiritual being.

### *Naturalism*

1. Naturalistic plays treat lower-class life and feature uneducated, inarticulate characters.
2. Naturalistic characters are often driven by irrational impulses; a whole set of causal principles operates beneath the surface of character, complicating motivation and action. Naturalism substitutes the Freudian id for conscious will, with the subconscious or unconscious mind acting as a motivating force.
3. Naturalism’s form tends toward the episodic, the fragmented, or the desultory—a form thought to be more “realistic” or slice-of-life-like than well-made dramatic form.
4. In naturalistic drama, heredity and environment overwhelm character.
5. Naturalism’s viewpoint is pessimistic and fatalistic; naturalism would improve the lot of the oppressed but seems to have as its ultimate ideal a humanity redeemed from this earth.
6. In a naturalistic play, human beings are depicted as animals and objects for scientific study or control.

### **5. Types of Theater/Production Criticism**

1. *Descriptive criticism* provides information about a play or production.
2. *Appreciative or denunciatory criticism* is gushing in its praise or sweeping in its condemnation; it may tell a great deal about a critic’s responses but little about the production itself.

3. *Evaluative criticism:*

- a. Its primary aim is to judge effectiveness.
- b. The critic may analyze the structure, characterization, and ideas of a script; may explain the playwright's purported intentions and the director's interpretation of them, and may then go on to assess how effectively the script has been realized on the stage.
- c. The evaluation usually gives some attention to all the elements involved in a production and how each has contributed to the overall effect; the critic is concerned with both the good and bad points of the production and with a final verdict on the effectiveness of what has been presented.
- d. Three basic problems of evaluative criticism:
  1. Understanding: what were the playwright, director, and other theater practitioners attempting to do from an artistic point of view? What was their goal?
  2. Effectiveness: how well did these theater practitioners do what they set out to do? How well was the director's concept realized through the acting, scenery, costumes, and lighting?
  3. Ultimate worth: was this particular play worth producing? Was it served well by this production?
- e. Questions to be answered by the informed and perceptive, "evaluative" critic:
  1. Who was responsible for, or involved in, the production? What are the names of the producer, director, designers, and major actors?
  2. Where and when did the performance take place? Will there be additional performances?
  3. Which play was performed? Is it a significant work? Who is the dramatist? What information about the dramatist or the script is important to an understanding of the production?
  4. How effectively was the script produced—i.e., directed, acted, and designed?
  5. Should others see this production? Why or why not?



## TOPICS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. “In modern drama characters often speak different languages, and words become barriers rather than bridges to understanding.” Discuss two of the following plays in light of this statement: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *The Birthday Party*.
2. Discuss *Hamlet* and one of the following three plays—*Pillars of Society*, *Major Barbara*, or *Long Day’s Journey into Night*—as exemplars of two of the Four Great Ages of Drama: respectively, the Elizabethan-Jacobean age and the modern Euro-American age (as opposed to the ancient Greek and Spanish Golden ages). Why are these ages great, and what makes each of these two plays an exemplar of such greatness?
3. Consider Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire* as an ape-like or less-than-human figure, being sure to account for the socio-psychological significance of the image of the ape in this American play.
4. The Spanish playwright García Lorca once declared, “If in certain scenes of a play the audience doesn’t know what to do, whether to laugh or cry, that will spell success to me.” Discuss the blending of the comic and the serious or tragic in *The Hostage* and *The Philanderer*, and, further, discuss the blending of these disparate elements in the character of Shakespeare’s Falstaff.
5. Discuss the extent to which *The Ghost Sonata* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* can each be considered a “dream play”—or a nightmare vision.
6. Discuss the pivotal role played by the otherwise passive or drugged Mary Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, as well as the pivotal roles played by Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (despite the underwritten nature of Linda’s character and her apparent exclusion from the major dramatic *agon* of Willy versus Biff) and Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



(despite the underwritten nature of Stella's character and her apparent exclusion from the major dramatic *agon* of Stanley versus Blanche). As you write, consider the veracity of the following remark: "When women characters on the American stage are depicted by men, they invariably are seen from the outside, in their relationship to males, but not from their own perspective."

7. To what extent can *Major Barbara*, *Loot*, and Derek Jarman's film of *Edward II* be considered, in the end, vile or immoral works of art, as opposed to the humanistic, ameliorative kind we are accustomed to seeing or reading?
8. It has been said that "the fundamental subject of almost all serious plays of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the attempt to resurrect fundamental ethical certainties *without* resurrecting the fundamental spiritual certainty of a judgmental God." Keeping this statement in mind, discuss the role of God and/or Christian symbolism in two of the following plays: *Major Barbara*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Saint Joan*, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *Life of Galileo*.
9. The following statement comes from Arthur Miller's essay "Tragedy and the Common Man": "Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity, or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force." Discuss how this statement applies, or does not apply (in which case the character may be considered tragic), to two of the following characters: Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*; Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*; Maurya from *Riders to the Sea*; James Tyrone from *Long Day's Journey into Night*; Mother Courage from *Mother Courage and Her Children*; and Romeo (along with Capulet and Friar Laurence) from *Romeo and Juliet*.
10. Compare and contrast the settings—and the thematic significance of those settings—for *Hamlet* and one of the following plays: *Riders to the Sea*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, or *The Birthday Party*.
11. Discuss the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve as it is dramatically employed in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*.
12. Discuss the role that expressionism plays in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, particularly at moments when Blanche is in extreme psychological distress.

13. Discuss the significance of the titles of three of the following plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Magnificent/Magnanimous Cuckold*, *Riders to the Sea*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *Life of Galileo*.
14. “Embedded in every major play written by an American playwright is a critique of American society.” Discuss two of the following plays in light of this statement: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Curse of the Starving Class*.
15. Discuss how the following statement applies to *Tartuffe*:

A certain degree of trust in others is indispensable in any human relations. It was relatively easier, however, to have and maintain this trust as long as there was little or no separation in people’s minds between formal and substantial relations, as long as the name and the thing—the mask and the face, the word and the deed, seeming and being—were held to be indissolubly bound in a single unity. No one suspected in the Middle Ages, for instance, that a host or a guest would act otherwise than as the names host and guest implied. Even by the Renaissance this situation had changed. The schism between names and things had doubtless always been present to some degree, but it was becoming characteristic of larger and larger areas of thought and behavior.
16. Discuss the extent to which two of the following works are social-problem plays: *Major Barbara*, *Pillars of Society*, *The Philanderer*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *The Hostage*. That is, what is the social problem in each drama, and to what extent is it resolved?
17. Consider the extent to which *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and *Loot* are each farces of the sexual or bedroom kind
18. Discuss the role of escape or illusion—of the illusion-making capacity of the human mind—as a dramatic factor in two of the following plays: *Tartuffe*, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. As you write, particularly about the American plays, keep in mind Larry Slade’s argument in O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* that pipe-dreaming “gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us.”
19. Choose two of the following character pairings and comment on the nature of each relationship: Willy Loman-Charley from *Death of a Salesman*; Bruno-Petrus from *The Magnanimous Cuckold*; Tartuffe-Orgon

from *Tartuffe*; Hamlet-Horatio, from *Hamlet*; Falstaff-Hal from parts 1 and 2 of *Henry IV*; and Galileo-Andrea, from *Life of Galileo*.

20. Susanne K. Langer once observed that “the tension between past and future is what gives to acts, situations, and even such constituent elements as gestures and attitudes the peculiar intensity known as dramatic quality.” Discuss this statement in relation to two of the following plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Pillars of Society*.
21. Discuss the avant-garde or non-representational techniques of *The Ghost Sonata* and *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. That is, how does each play revolt against conventional dramatic form and representational or illusionistic theater?
22. Compare and contrast *She Stoops to Conquer* and either *Misalliance*, *Candida*, or *The Philanderer* as romantic comedies on the subject of love and marriage.
23. Given the distinctions made between realism and naturalism in this book’s Study Guides, choose two of the followings plays and discuss the extent to which each is realistic or naturalistic, or a combination of the two styles: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Birthday Party*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Major Barbara*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Pillars of Society*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Curse of the Starving Class*.
24. Consider the extent to which *Saint Joan* is a chronicle or history play, a religious drama, and a tragedy (a “tragedy without villains,” this drama has been called, as well as Shaw’s “only tragedy”) all at the same time.
25. Compare and contrast Marlowe’s Elizabethan historical tragedy *Edward II* (full title: *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England, with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer*) and Brecht’s modernist epic drama *The Life of Edward II of England*.
26. Films have been made of the following plays (or characters) treated in this book: *The Birthday Party*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Five Kings* (a.k.a. *Chimes at Midnight* or *Falstaff*), *Hamlet*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Edward II*, *Major Barbara*, *Saint Joan*, *The Magnificent Cuckold*, *Tartuffe*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Life of Galileo*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Loot*, and *Pillars of Society*. Choose two of these plays (apart from *Edward II*) and discuss how well—or how badly—each one has made the transition to cinema. If you have not seen any of the film adaptations of the dramas listed above, choose two of them nonetheless and, keeping in mind the distinctions made between theater

and cinema in the Study Guides (as well as some of the definitions in the Glossary of Dramatic Terms), discuss from a theoretical perspective the feasibility of adapting each play to the screen.

27. Discuss the endings of *Tartuffe* and *Romeo and Juliet* as exemplifications of the comic vision, being sure to treat the “change,” or lack thereof, in characters such as Orgon, Capulet, and Friar Laurence.
28. Consider the fact that *Glengarry Glen Ross* does not contain a single female character. What effect, if any, does this exclusion have on the world of the play and, by extension, the outcome of the drama?
29. Juliet has been called the “tragic waste” in the play *Romeo and Juliet*. What, in your view, is meant by the term “tragic waste,” and to what extent do you think Juliet is an instance of it?
30. Discuss *Major Barbara* as an exemplification of the following statement, and, by contrast, discuss *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* as the antithesis of the same statement: “If one considers main characters as ‘ideas’ or ethical/moral agents, many a dramatic plot can be converted into a sort of dialectic in which one ‘idea’ conflicts with or opposes another.”
31. Make a case for or against Brecht as an avant-garde or non-realistic artist, using two of the following plays as examples: *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Life of Galileo*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Good Person of Setzuan*, and *Mr. Puntilla and His Man Matti*.
32. Discuss the extent to which, and the reason why, plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *Life of Galileo* are instances of “telescoping”: the setting of the action of a work of art in the past, far removed from the time period during which the artwork itself was created.
33. Compare and contrast *Candida* and *The Ghost Sonata* as mystery plays.
34. Discuss Algernon Swinburne’s 1866 poem “A Leave-taking” as a synecdoche for the action of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. This poem, quoted late in O’Neill’s play, is quoted in full below:

Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.  
Let us go hence together without fear;  
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,  
And over all old things and all things dear.  
She loves not you nor me as all we love her.  
Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,  
She would not hear.

Let us rise up and part; she will not know.  
Let us go seaward as the great winds go,  
Full of blown sand and foam; what help is here?  
There is no help, for all these things are so,  
And all the world is bitter as a tear.  
And how these things are, though ye strove to show,  
She would not know.

Let us go home and hence; she will not weep.  
We gave love many dreams and days to keep,  
Flowers without scent, and fruits that would not grow,  
Saying 'If thou wilt, thrust in thy sickle and reap.'  
All is reaped now; no grass is left to mow;  
And we that sowed, though all we fell on sleep,  
She would not weep.

Let us go hence and rest; she will not love.  
She shall not hear us if we sing hereof,  
Nor see love's ways, how sore they are and steep.  
Come hence, let be, lie still; it is enough.  
Love is a barren sea, bitter and deep;  
And though she saw all heaven in flower above,  
She would not love.

Let us give up, go down; she will not care.  
Though all the stars made gold of all the air,  
And the sea moving saw before it move  
One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair;  
Though all those waves went over us, and drove  
Deep down the stifling lips and drowning hair,  
She would not care.

Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see.  
Sing all once more together; surely she,  
She too, remembering days and words that were,  
Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,  
We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been there.  
Nay, and though all men seeing had pity on me,  
She would not see.

35. *She Stoops to Conquer* has been described as a "laughing" comedy as opposed to a sentimental one, as a Restoration-style comedy of manners,

as a romantic comedy, and as a satirical farce. Which description do you think best fits this play, and why?

36. Discuss *Death of a Salesman*'s use of a dual time-frame (to distinguish present action from past action) and its genre (or one of its genres): that of "memory play."
37. Consider *Glengarry Glen Ross*, on the one hand, and *Curse of the Starving Class*, on the other, in light of the following statement: "David Mamet's rise to the forefront of American drama has been seen as the triumph of a minimalist, the most obvious component of whose signature style is his dialogue. Only Sam Shepard has a comparably emphatic signature style, but his depends less on the shape and sound of words than on a offbeat, sometimes surreal use of scenic elements."
38. While at first glance the homes of the Tyrones and the Lomans may have little in common, there are striking parallels between the two families in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Death of a Salesman*. Describe those parallels and consider their thematic implications for American drama as a whole, as well as their social significance for American civilization.
39. What is the difference between dramatic analysis/criticism and dramatic theory? Which is more important, dramatic analysis/criticism or dramatic theory, or are they equally important in the end?
40. Brecht published an essay called "Three Cheers for Shaw." Speculate as to why he would write such an encomium, and consider how you yourself would describe the affinities between these two important dramatists.
41. Compare and contrast the characters of Shelley Levene, from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and Willy Loman, from *Death of a Salesman*.
42. Compare and contrast the artist-figures Edmund, from *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and Marchbanks, from *Candida*.
43. Comment upon the following speech by Cléante (addressed to Orgon) in the movement and meaning of *Tartuffe*:

Ah, there you go—extravagant as ever!  
Why can you not be rational? You never  
Manage to take the middle course, it seems,  
But jump, instead, between absurd extremes.  
You've recognized your recent grave mistake  
In falling victim to a pious fake;  
Now, to correct that error, must you embrace  
An even greater error in its place,

And judge our worthy neighbors as a whole  
 By what you've learned from one corrupted soul?  
 Come, just because one rascal made you swallow  
 A show of zeal which turned out to be hollow,  
 Shall you conclude that all men are deceivers,  
 And that, today, there are no true believers?  
 Let atheists make that foolish inference;  
 Learn to distinguish virtue from pretense,  
 Be cautious in bestowing admiration,  
 And cultivate a sober moderation.  
 Don't humor fraud, but also don't asperse  
 True piety; the latter fault is worse,  
 And it is best to err, if err one must,  
 As you have done, upon the side of trust.

44. Discuss *Riders to the Sea*—particularly its use of language—in light of the following statement by J. M. Synge:

In countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, which has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.



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